

XVII.—Catullus, c. 1

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Although the editors, in the comment appended to this poem, have given us much factual information about it, they have rarely, if ever, succeeded in elucidating its nature, explaining its purpose and point, and showing its relation to Catullus' works as a whole. Hesitating, apparently, to indulge in speculation, they have limited themselves to a literal reading of Catullus' words; the result has been to make the poem seem pleasant but pointless, a bit of graceful but not very convincing flattery.

Yet it should have been clear that, of all the Roman poets, Catullus was the least likely to have wasted time and effort on amiable but aimless verse. Poetry, to him, was a serious business—witness his impatience with Volusius and Suffenus, who regarded it as a mere matter of tossing off lines that would more or less scan. A proper interpretation of c. 1 should show that, like any good introductory poem, it truly "introduced" the reader to the volume to come, gave him some hint of its character, and some indication of the poet's aims, ideals, and standards.

As a first step toward interpreting the poem, let us consider in outline what it says. "Here," declares the poet, "is a volume of my poems, as neat and charming and fresh as you like. Who's to get it? Why, Cornelius, of course—who else? I owe him at least that much for his sympathy and encouragement, which have been the more striking because his own work is so very different from mine. Well, here it is! It may not amount to much, to be sure, and there may be those who reserve judgment about its worth, but I'm inclined to think it's sound poetry and will make its mark."

Starting with this "story," if I may so call it, let us now proceed to a closer examination of the poem. In the first two lines the volume of poems is described as *lepidus* and *novus*, the latter of these two adjectives being augmented by specific detail—*arido modo pumice expolitum*. The most recent scholarship has insisted that these lines must be taken quite literally,¹ and that Catullus is

¹ See, for example, Kroll's note *ad loc.*

telling us nothing but that his book is "just off the press." Yet it is a truism that Roman poets tend to put first things first, to strike the eye of the reader first with that one idea which most aptly characterizes or most pointedly summarizes the whole of their work.² Granted that this is only a tendency and not a rule, why should Catullus have made such point of the mere physical newness of his book? Surely he would not have sent any but a new copy of his volume to the friend to whom it was dedicated. And it is not only *novus*, but *lepidus*. This adjective, too, we are told, is to be taken literally: it is a "pretty, new book," what the book-sellers call a "crisp, clean copy" — that and nothing more.

Perhaps it was this very phrase, so familiar to all readers of book-catalogs, that led the editors astray here, and made them forget that the adjective *lepidus* refers primarily to qualities of character and personality, and to external appearances only insofar as these reflect character.³ Thus when Catullus calls his book *lepidus*, he is thinking of the fact that its looks reflect its character, not merely of its handsome appearance.⁴ As for the meaning of *lepidus*, it is a word from the popular vocabulary, used to describe the compound of good humor and human warmth that is to be seen in those whose capacity for giving affection is matched by their readiness to receive it. It belongs in the sphere of everyday, ordinary life and behavior, and its relative rarity in "high" or "classical" Latin is an indication of the fact that the writers of that dialect considered the ordinary and everyday unsuitable for their purposes and antipathetic to their literary aims and ideals.⁵

² Besides such obvious examples as Vergil's *Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi* (Ed. 1.1), *quid faciat laetas segetes, quo sidere terram vertere* (Geo. 1.1 f.), and *arma virumque cano* (Aen. 1.1), we may set Propertius' *Cynthia prima suis miserum me cepit ocellis* (1.1) and Tibullus' *divitias alius fulvo sibi congerat auro* (1.1).

³ Cf. Cat. 78.1-2, *Gallus habet fratres, quorum est lepidissima coniunx alterius, lepidus filius alterius*, where the biting sarcasm of the lines is utterly lost if the adjectives are made to refer merely to the appearance of the individuals involved. The meaning of *lepidus* is attested by a host of passages (see the dict., s.v.); Terence's *O lepidum patrem* (And. 948) will stand for them all. Kroll has quite misunderstood Plautus *Poenulus* 27 (*lepidis litteris, lepidis tabellis lepida conscriptis manu*), where *lepidus* is transferred from the girl to her handwriting, which is thus described as "charming," not as "pretty."

⁴ Baehrens recognizes this fact (*ad loc.*): *hoc enim 'lepidum,' etsi et ipsum possit aliqua ex parte referri ad habitum externum iucundum . . . , multo magis internas designat virtutes: plenum salis et facetiarum. . . .*

⁵ When Cicero, for example, uses the term, it is with a sneer: *hi pueri tam lepidi ac delicati* (In Cat. 2.10.23).

Catullus' choice of the adjective was no accident; he used it with the express purpose of revealing himself a writer, not only of the amusing, agreeable, amiable, and charming, but of these qualities *in their popular guise*, expressed in the language of the people.

It is in this respect, too, that he calls his volume "new,"⁶ not so much to proclaim it the first of its kind (although it may have been), as to indicate that he is writing in a manner different from that of his predecessors. Upon meeting Catullus' phrase for the first time, the casual reader probably attached no special significance to it. However, after he had read the whole volume he would have seen what the poet meant, and would have realized that in proclaiming his book a *lepidus novus libellus* he had accurately and neatly forewarned us of its character.

This book, then, having been proclaimed as new in subject matter, language, and manner, is to be dedicated to Cornelius Nepos.⁷ And why? Because Cornelius had encouraged Catullus in his attempt to write a new kind of poetry; although the general opinion had been that his poems were mere "stuff" (*nugae*), Cornelius had kept insisting (*solebas putare*) that they were "not bad at all" (*esse aliquid*). About these lines two points need to be noted. In the first place, they are written in the popular idiom; *esse aliquid* is a colloquial expression and *nugae* very close to slang.⁸ Thus Catullus carries on and enforces the point he had made in using the adjective *lepidus*: he will write the lyric in a light vein, and in the speech of the people. The choice of words was no accident and no affectation; neither was it a mere bit of pointless banter. Instead it is a deliberate proclamation of intent and an illustration of a poetic theory.

The second point has to do with the underlying significance of these lines, for like the phrase *lepidus novus libellus* they convey more than a literal meaning. This, I believe, would have been clear if

⁶ Baehrens, *ad loc.*: itaque "novum" praeterea indicare videtur librum, qualem antea non tulerunt litterae latinae, in suo genere primum. . . .

⁷ About the identity of Catullus' Cornelius with Cornelius Nepos there is certainly no doubt. In point of fact, the identification is of no more than casual interest, for the poem itself adequately explains the reason for the dedication, and it does not matter in the least who "Cornelius" was.

⁸ Cf. Cic. *Ad Fam.* 6.18.4: *ego quoque aliquid sum*; *Ad Att.* 4.2.2: *si umquam in dicendo fuimus aliquid*. For other examples see *TLL* 1.1614.49-59. As for *nugae*, it never finds a place in "high" Latin, except as a quotation from the popular idiom, used for purposes of humor, ridicule, or some other rhetorical color: see the *exx.* in the dictt. *s.v.*

the editors had not misunderstood *nugae*. Almost without exception, they have declared it to be a technical term, a name or designation for light verse,⁹ although they should have noted that they could cite no plausible parallels for this usage before Horace, and no certain parallels before Martial.¹⁰ There is no indication that *nugae* meant to Catullus anything different from what it meant to Plautus, namely, "stuff," "bunk," "junk," "tripe" — a contemptuous and completely undignified expression for anything foolish, stupid, and worthless.¹¹ This of course does not represent Catullus' own opinion of his poems; to take it so would be to place Cornelius in the odd position of attributing merit to work which its own author had dismissed as worthless. The whole point is that Cornelius had consistently encouraged Catullus, in the face of what others had said. It is these others, Catullus' critics, who have called his poems *nugae*, while Cornelius has courageously stood by his young, radical friend, shown him sympathy and understanding, and given him the heart to go on with his new venture in the field of lyric poetry.¹²

Viewed in this light, the next three lines (vss. 5-7) can be seen to be a warm compliment to Cornelius. His sympathy and understanding, his encouragement of the young poet whom others scorned, had been truly amazing in view of the fact that his own work was so very different from Catullus'. The patient, scholarly historian, who had concentrated "all history" within the brief compass of three papyrus rolls, might have been expected to see little merit in any kind of lyric poetry, and least of all in a lyric which chose for its vehicle, not the dignified language of the great

⁹ See Baehrens and Merrill, *ad loc.* Kroll avoids this error, but falls into one even worse: "*nugas* nennt C. seine Arbeiten im Gegensatz zu der wissenschaftlichen Leistung des Freundes, etc." This, in a prosy manner quite unlike Catullus, anticipates and takes the edge off the contrast between Catullus' and Cornelius' work which is brought out in lines 5-7.

¹⁰ Horace's *nescioquid meditans nugarum* (*Sat.* 1.9.2) is a highly doubtful parallel, as is *nugis addere pondus* (*Ep.* 1.19.42), for the context in both cases indicates that Horace is thinking primarily of the frivolity or dubious worth of such efforts, and not of their form. Porphyrio's comment on *Sat.* 1.9.2 (*sic verecunde poetae nugas et lusus solent appellare versiculos suos*) sounds to me like a deduction drawn from the usage of the poets themselves rather than a conclusion based on independent evidence. The Martial parallels (2.86.9; 4.10.1) are somewhat stronger — but in the meantime nearly 150 years have passed!

¹¹ Good examples may be found in the dict., *s.v.* Particularly telling are Plaut. *Men.* 54-55, 86, 620-625.

¹² One is reminded of the encouragement given by Robert Bridges to Gerard Manley Hopkins: see Bridges' introduction to his edition of Hopkins' poems.

classical lyricists, but the speech of the streets and taverns of Rome. Yet he had been sympathetic; he had taken time from his endless, toilsome research to offer a hand to his young friend; probably in the face of severe criticism from those who looked on Catullus as a crude vulgarian, a blasphemer of the holy name of the Muses, in short, a writer of "stuff."

Nor is this the full measure of Catullus' gratitude to Cornelius. Vs. 7 has traditionally been taken as a simple expression of awe on the poet's part at the learning and labor that Cornelius had expended upon his historical writings. It is at once more and less than that. Catullus had been impressed by Cornelius' scholarliness and industry, to be sure, and his gratitude for Cornelius' encouragement had been the greater because this man, of preoccupations and interests so very different from his own, had taken the time and trouble to be to him an *amicus certus in re incerta*. Now we see that Catullus felt an even greater debt to Cornelius because he (Catullus) could not reciprocate by an honest admiration and liking for Cornelius' work. For, pressed now to say something nice about the book of the man who had so graciously praised his poems, Catullus, who was constitutionally unable to be dishonest, could come up with nothing more than a *doctus* and a *laboriosus*: "The learning that went into these books — Jupiter! — the work!" Very likely Catullus hoped that his compliment would pass muster, and that Cornelius would realize that the poet was doing his best to be appreciative; nevertheless, he is saying quite clearly that his obligation is the greater because he cannot match Cornelius' enthusiasm for his poetry with anything like an equal enthusiasm for the other's histories.

It is perhaps for this very reason that the concluding lines of the poem (vss. 8–10) exhibit such an unusual degree of modesty: Catullus speaks of this "bit of a book,"¹³ suggests that there is "not much to it,"¹⁴ and that it "may not be too good,"¹⁵ hoping thereby to soften the blow struck by his forced compliment on the character of Cornelius' works. Catullus, however, is thinking not of his own opinion of his poetry, which can hardly have been so

¹³ *Hoc libelli*: see Baehrens, *ad loc.*

¹⁴ *Quicquid*: cf. Verg. *Aen.* 1.78, *quodcumque hoc regni*.

¹⁵ *Qualecumque*. The extremely colloquial nature of both vocabulary and syntax in these lines is of course intentional, and continues the idea already expressed by *lepidus*, *nugae*, and *Juppiter!*, above.

humble, but rather of the impression which he fears it must make on Cornelius: "Compared to your own works, it probably won't seem like much." In *qualecumque* we may see a similar reflection of the general opinion of Catullus' poems; there has been considerable doubt expressed of their worth, and for that reason, too, they may seem to Cornelius to be a very slight return for his kindness.

Having been thus modest and restrained, Catullus could scarcely have ended his poem with a bold assertion that his works would live for all time; to have done so would not only have disrupted the unity of the thought; it would have been crude and grotesque, an example of the *ineptum* and the *invenustum* which he detested above all things.¹⁶ Instead, he continues the self-effacing tone of the poem, and ends with a prayer that through divine grace, his book may "last forever" and not be a mere creature of the age. The modesty of his request is accented by the fact that it is addressed to no deity by name, but only to a *'patrona virgo*, who may be either the Muse, as most editors now assume, or Pallas Athena-Minerva, as Guarinus long ago conjectured. It is as if the poet, having so misprized his work, felt that it would be presumptuous to mention any deity by name, and preferred a mere joggling of the divine elbow, as if a gentle bid for attention might gain him a more sympathetic hearing.¹⁷ Once again we may be certain that Catullus' own opinion of his work was scarcely as humble as this; his modesty here is dictated partly by the desire for poetic concinnity and consistency, and partly because he is well aware of the storm of criticism which his works are bound to evoke.¹⁸ He will make neither himself nor Cornelius look foolish by a bold prediction of immortality for poetry that has already been dismissed as *nugae* by the critics; instead, by his quiet prayer, he will let his readers know that he is convinced of the soundness of his poetic theory, and ask that they give his work the benefit of dispassionate judgment.

This poem then must not be regarded as a mere introductory flourish, nor need we wonder why Catullus chose to dedicate his lively, graceful poetry to the dull and pedantic scholar, Cornelius Nepos.¹⁹ Rather, it is to be thought of as the poem of an innovator,

¹⁶ See E. A. Havelock, *The Lyric Genius of Catullus* (Oxford 1939) 105.

¹⁷ See H. A. J. Munro, *Criticisms and Elucidations of Catullus* (London 1905) 3.

¹⁸ See G. Lafaye, *Catulle et ses modèles* (Paris 1894) 103-108.

¹⁹ We are told, of course, that Nepos wrote erotic verse himself, and the histories of literature (e.g., Schanz-Hosius) sometimes accord him a place among the *novi poetae*, but his biographies may justly cause us to feel some doubt of his poetic fire.

a radical, a rebel against traditionalism,²⁰ whose works have been under heavy fire from his contemporaries, and who here expresses in graceful and gracious manner his gratitude for the sympathy and encouragement of a man so unlike himself. Besides that, it proclaims the poet's own theory of the lyric, decisively, although without fanfare: that it can be written about the ordinary circumstances of life and in the language of the people, and that poetry written in this vein and manner deserves serious consideration by the critic and student of literature. Finally, in its language, its style, and its sentiment, it is an accurate representation of the book of poems itself, and thus performs the function of any good introduction: to prepare and forewarn the reader of what is to come.

²⁰ The fact that Catullus had Greek models for at least some of his "radical" poetry (e.g., Archilochus: see Lafaye, *op. cit.*, 21-23) in no way detracts from its novelty as a literary venture *in Rome*.