

THE FUTURE OF CATULLUS

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"Sight and insight, give us those."

Robert Frost to Sidney Cox,

January 2, 1915.

For a few moments this evening I would like to indulge in what I most enjoy doing, and that is in talking about Latin poetry and its influence on later literature.* I have in mind some thoughts on Catullus and his reception by Robert Frost, as illustrated particularly in his poem "For Once, Then, Something."¹ It is a subject that first came to my attention in November, 1957, at Adams House, Harvard, when for the only time I heard Frost read and talk about poetry. Among other poems he offered us one he had first published in 1943, "Take Something Like a Star." This monologue craving to become a dialogue, in which the speaker apostrophizes a taciturn star, is concerned with the penetration of "obscurity" and "mystery" to discover "something"—a word that appears four times in the text as well as in the title. The poem ends as the hitherto unresponsive heavenly being²

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¹ Helen Bacon has treated the relationship of Frost and Catullus in "Dialogue of Poets: *Mens Animi* and the Renewal of Words," *Massachusetts Review* 19 (1978), 319–34 *passim*. Professor Bacon has also written the best general appraisal of Frost and the classics, "'In- and Outdoor Schooling': Robert Frost and the Classics," published by the Library of Congress (Washington 1975) in *Robert Frost: Lectures on the Centennial of His Birth*, 3–25 (abridged and modified under the same title for *The American Scholar* 43 [1974] 640–49). See pp. 3 and 5–6 on Catullus and p. 23, note 6, for a valuable bibliography on Frost and ancient literature. Among other recent, specific studies must be mentioned Professor Bacon's essays "For Girls: From 'Birches' to 'Wild Grapes,'" *The Yale Review* (1977) 13–29, on Frost and Euripides' *Bacchae*, and "The Contemporary Reader and Robert Frost: The Heavenly Guest of 'One More Brevity' and *Aeneid* 8," *The St. John's Review* (summer, 1981) 3–10 on Dalmatian Gus and the emperor Augustus. See also Kiffin Rockwell, "Robert Frost: Doctus Recludere Fontes," *CJ* 68 (1973) 182–83, on "The Pasture," Lucretius and Virgil, and Lowell Edmunds, "Frost's *Fontes*," *CJ* 70 (1975) 36–37, on Frost and Virgil's fifth *eclogue*.

² All quotations of Frost's poetry are from *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Copyright 1923, 1928, 1934, 1949, ©1969 by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Copyright 1934, 1951, ©1956, 1962 by Robert Frost. Copyright ©1977

... asks of us a certain height,
 So when at times the mob is swayed
 To carry praise or blame too far,
 We may take something like a star
 To stay our minds on and be staid.

The alliterative link between star, stay and staid (itself played upon) recalls Frost's famous definition of poetry as "a momentary stay against confusion."³ Poetry and the life of the imagination are what make us, its readers, staid. The star, steadied loftily in the heavens, is its symbol. In the commentary subsequent to his lecture Frost compared the star to Catullus. I learned only many years later that Frost was fond of drawing the analogy. He uses it in his last address to a college audience, at Dartmouth in November, 1962, where, after reading the same poem, he observes "By that star I mean the Arabian Nights or Catullus or something in the Bible or something way off or something way off in the woods. . . ."⁴

The connection between the two poets was reinforced for me on reading Robert Lowell's moving obituary of Frost, published in the first issue of the *New York Review of Books*. Lowell, thinking of Frost's house on Brewster Street, Cambridge, imagines ". . . the barish rooms, the miscellaneous gold-lettered old classics, the Georgian poets, the Catullus by his bedside, the iron stove where he sometimes did his cooking, and the stool drawn up to his visitor's chair so that he could ramble and listen."⁵ (Frost's long-time secretary and friend Kathleen Morrison confirms for me by letter that his copy of Catullus was "oftentimes bedside.")⁶ Some recent splendid pages by Helen Bacon have spurred me on to look more specifically at this poetic

by Lesley Frost Ballantine. Reprinted by permission of Holt, Rinehart and Winston, publishers.

³ "The Figure a Poem Makes" in *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. by Hyde Cox and E. C. Lathem (New York 1968) 18. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Frost's prose are from this edition. For some wise words on poetic form as Frost's "principal means of confronting the contrarities of existence," see J. L. Potter, *Robert Frost Handbook* (University Park 1980) 142-43. Catullus and Frost are not unique in finding the act of writing as a form of control for self and for one's world.

⁴ From "On Extravagance," first published in the March 1963 *Dartmouth Alumni Monthly* and reprinted in *Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose*, ed. E. C. Lathem and L. Thompson (New York 1972).

For other occasions when Frost equates the "star" of "Take Something Like a Star" with Catullus see Reginald Cook, *Robert Frost: A Living Voice* (Amherst 1974) 183 (quoting a talk of July 3, 1961) and 191 (a talk of July 2, 1962, on which see below p. 262). Cf. also Cook 136, quoting a talk of June 29, 1959:

And by star—I've just used that as though it might be some poet of a thousand years ago—two thousand years—something way out of all of this.

⁵ *NYRB* 1 (Feb. 25, 1963) 47.

⁶ Letter to the author, June 10, 1980.

interaction.⁷ I hope that Helen will forgive me for taking again the road she has so surely made her own.

I would like first to catalogue the explicit references to Catullus that I have been able to discover in Frost and then go on to speculate on deeper reasons for their congeniality. Frost, as you are aware, was a well-trained Latinist who scatters direct references to Horace, Virgil, Lucretius and Tibullus throughout his work. At Lawrence High School, where he graduated in 1892, Frost followed the standard Latin *cursus* from Caesar to Cicero and Virgil, and in his abortive freshman year at Dartmouth he read Livy.⁸ It was only when he returned to college at Harvard in the fall of 1897 that we can be certain he read Catullus for the first time. There he enrolled in Latin D with Mr. Charles P. Parker. In the departmental announcement the course description reads: "Livy (Book I or Selections from Books XXI and XXII).—Selections from Lyric, Elegiac, and Iambic Poetry.—Terence (Phormio and Adelphoe). Reading at Sight." This was a year course and his registration card shows Frost attending from the beginning. The text for the selections was a collection published that same year by four members of the Harvard Classics department.⁹ It includes twenty-six of the most familiar poems from the Catullan *corpus*, with commentary by M. W. Mather, but curiously omits two out of the three poems to which Frost most frequently alludes—poem 65, to Orthalus on the speaker's lack of inspiration, and 85, *Odi et amo*.

It is also noteworthy that most of the direct references to Catullus occur within the last twelve years of Frost's life. One of these, anomalous in several senses, is in a letter to Louis Henry Cohn, one of his principal collectors, dated September 12, 1951.¹⁰ Frost names President Conant of Harvard who was, among other things, an outstanding chemist, as representative of the new science which can develop

a contraceptive to be taken at the mouth so we can stop breeding
without having to stop futution. I made a five line poem on the event
entitled *Pares Continuas Fututiones* (Catullus XXXII).

I quote the poem in full:

⁷ See above, note 1.

⁸ I have relied heavily here and throughout this essay on the standard, three volume life of Frost by L. Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874–1915* (New York 1966) hereafter cited as Thompson I, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915–1938* (New York 1970) hereafter Thompson II, and by L. Thompson and R. H. Winnick, *Robert Frost: The Later Years, 1938–1963* (New York 1976) hereafter Thompson-Winnick.

⁹ I am grateful here to the staff of Harvard University Archives for their help.

¹⁰ Quoted in *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. L. Thompson (New York 1964) 549. It is interesting that earlier in the same letter Frost alludes to the heart-mind correlation so important to him. Of 1906, when he endured a nearly fatal bout with pneumonia, he writes "I had hardly accomplished a thing then that I had in my heart if not in my mind to do."

Says our Harvard Neo Malthusian
 "We cant keep the poor from futution;
 But by up to date feeding
 We can keep them from breeding."
 Which seems a licentious conclusion!

Frost's variation on Catullus' words, anticipating the nine-times rich rewards of a siesta with Ipsithilla, was never admitted into his collected poems! Another poem he did not allow among his published pieces, no doubt for somewhat different reasons, was entitled "On the Question of an Old Man's Feelings." Written in 1953, it served as retort for what Frost considered an attack on him by the reclusive poet of Amherst, Robert Francis, who had the dubious hobby of collecting praying mantises.¹¹ Here is part of the poem:

In his herb garden he would cultivate
 The Praying Mantis for the way they mate.
 After the female drains her mate by force
 She eats the male up for a second course.
 But whether this may be from love or hate
 Or both of them combined at any rate
 There must be something it's a symbol of;
 Let's say the combination hate and love
 Asserts Catullus whose address was Rome
 If I may quote a poet in a pome. . . .

But two poems of Catullus, the first and the sixty-fifth, are mentioned by Frost in several connections of a more studied nature. Frost was fond of quoting Catullus 1, and he chose its final line,

Plus uno maneat perenne saeclo,

as motto on the title-page of *Aforesaid*, a collection of his poetry which Holt put together for his birthday in 1954.¹² And the phrase *mens animi*, literally, the mind of the spirit, which Catullus uses in poem 65 à propos of his loss of creativity consequent on his brother's death, fascinated Frost. He makes public use of it for the first time, apparently, in a collection of *sententiae* printed in the *Atlantic Monthly* for June, 1951, under the title "Poetry and School."¹³ An abbreviated list of these precepts runs as follows:

Almost everyone should have experienced the fact that a poem
 is an idea caught fresh in the act of dawning.
 Also that felicity can't be fussed into existence.

¹¹ Found in Frost's papers, now in the Dartmouth College Library, and quoted by Thompson-Winnick 206.

¹² On Frost's fondness for reciting Catullus 1, see Reuben Brower, *The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention* (New York 1963) 138.

¹³ *The Atlantic Monthly* 187 (1951) 30-33.

Also that there is such a thing as having a moment. And that the great thing is to know a moment when you have one.
Also to know what Catullus means by *mens animi*.

Almost exactly six years later Frost glosses this last apothegm during his Taylorian Lecture at Oxford on June 4, 1957, when he remarks:¹⁴

Poetry is the thoughts of the heart. I'm sure that's what Catullus meant by *mens animi*. Poetry is hyphenated, like so many British names. It's a thought-felt thing. . . .

"Feeling is always ahead of thinking," he says that same summer at Bread Loaf.¹⁵

It is no accident that allusions to all three poems, 1, 65 and 85, are to be found in "Kitty Hawk," an extraordinary poem first published as Frost's 1956 Christmas poem but whose subtitle reads "Back there in 1953 with the Huntington Cairnses." The work skirts autobiography in the sense that the speaker at the start relives the suicidal journey on which Frost set out in 1894 after his suit was seemingly rejected by Elinor White.¹⁶ But the poem's chief notion summarizes one of the major themes of Frost's poetry:

¹⁴ Quoted by Thompson-Winnick 238.

¹⁵ From an informal talk at Bread Loaf, August 1, 1957, quoted by Cook, *Robert Frost* 207. Considerations of the thought-felt-known relationship dot Frost's critical pronouncements from "The Constant Symbol" ("A poem is the emotion of having a thought while the reader waits a little anxiously for the success of dawn . . ." [*Selected Prose* 26]) to the *Paris Review* interview with Richard Poirier ("It ought to be that you're getting them [rhymes] good all the way, carrying out some intention more felt than thought.") in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, second series (New York 1963) 33. It is put most succinctly in "Education by Poetry" (*Selected Prose* 44):

Then there is literary belief. Every time a poem is written, every time a short story is written, it is written not by cunning, but by belief. The beauty, the something, the little charm of the thing to be, is more felt than known.

It is a constant presence in Cook's reminiscences of Frost at Bread Loaf (see, e.g., 60 and 165 and his commentary, 4, 6, 23 and 209, on seeing-perceiving-knowing). But perhaps its most famous variation was written to Louis Untermeyer, January 1, 1916 (*The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer* [New York 1963] 22):

A poem is never a put-up job so to speak. It begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a love-sickness. It is never a thought to begin with. It is at its best when it is a tantalizing vagueness. It finds its thought and succeeds or doesn't find it and comes to nothing. It finds its thought or makes its thought. . . . It finds the thought and the thought finds the words. Let's say again: A poem particularly must not begin with the thought first.

Frost views the distinction from another angle in a talk which he gave at Bryn Mawr on January 15, 1926. Lawrance Thompson summarizes: "The poem itself might be the quiver of the transition from belief to realization" (Thompson II 293 and note 17, 619).

¹⁶ The details are in Thompson I 173-89 and Thompson-Winnick 300-303.

the need, as we follow out “Our instinctive venture / Into what they call / The material,” to risk “spirit / In substantiation” as we further our “on-penetration / Into earth and skies.” In the course of fleshing out this definition of living by dint of the mind’s efforts, which, for him, is to say by poetry, Frost makes his three bows to Catullus. The first is in a specific eulogy of the Wright brothers and our new-found ability, literally, to fly:

That’s because though mere
Lilliputians we’re
What Catullus called
Somewhat (*aliquid*).
Mind you, we are mind.

The second refers to how mankind—“In a love and hate / Rivalry combined”—invented the alphabet. And the last looks yet again at our need for, and power gained from, penetration, reflection and insight:

And the better part
Is the ray we dart
From this head and heart,
The *mens animi*.

These are major themes in the poem: the twining of hate and love, the progression by a poet and in a poem from feeling to thinking, the importance of “somewhat” (or, more often in Frost’s usage, “something”) in dignifying the reticent, securing knowledge, forging unsuspected connections, making metaphor, in a word. They are here not only labelled Catullan but supported with quoted Latin. They permeate the work of both poets. Catullus, for instance, combines the first two in poem 85 where, after exclaiming on his strange double perception of hating and loving, the speaker immediately proceeds to announce his lack of understanding of why this happens, even though the sensation of torture is present.¹⁷ As early as 1900 Frost varies both notions in his first of many poems about “Stars.”¹⁸ It concludes:

And yet with neither love nor hate
Those stars like some snow-white
Minerva’s snow-white marble eyes
Without the gift of sight.

The emotionless stars behold humanity’s plight from a distance, endowed with sight but not insight, the ability to see but not to experience suffering.

¹⁷ This marvelous poem is one of the times in Catullus when he anticipates the ironic Frostian gesture of using conversational tone to convey content that terrifies. The offhand *fortasse requiris* implies a second person interlocutor both disinterested and fascinated, who might be expected to wonder and question. If the “you” is Lesbia, her need to ask only further underscores the bitterness her incomprehension fosters in the speaker.

¹⁸ On the dating of “Stars” see Thompson I 258–59 and note 11, 546–47.

And the presence or absence of love and hate in human affairs is a subject Frost pursues thereafter in many of his most famous poems, such as "Fire and Ice" or "Build Soil."¹⁹ As for heart and mind, I will single out two instances from many. The first is found in his tribute to Amy Lowell, published in 1925 not long after her death:²⁰

The most exciting movement in nature is not progress, advance,
but expansion and contraction, the opening and shutting of the eye, the
hand, the heart, the mind. We throw our arms wide with a gesture of
religion to the universe; we close them around a person. We explore
and adventure for a while and then we draw in to consolidate our gains.
The breathless swing is between subject matter and form.

Frost mined the opening sentence, with its progress in perception from physical to emotional to spiritual, for a poem written two years later, "The Armful," in which the slippery packages the speaker is attempting to carry serve as metaphor for life's burdensome extremes with which the thinker-speaker must cope:

With all I have to hold with, hand and mind
And heart, if need be, I will do my best
To keep their building balanced at my breast.

My second example of Frost's continued fascination with the heart-mind dichotomy is the poem first published in 1934 entitled "On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind" to which, when printed in *A Further Range*, Frost gave the subtitle "or, From Sight to Insight." It begins, characteristically,

Something I saw or thought I saw
In the desert at midnight in Utah,
Looking out of my lower berth
At moonlit sky and moonlit earth.

The speaker, pinpointed in time and place, poised between earth and heaven, in motion from experience to experience, sees "A flickering, human pathetic light," betokening despair. But, as his heart begins to cloud his mind, he imagines a better tale, where the people seen control their light, which is to say their lives, without fear. The poem balances

¹⁹ Perhaps the distinction is put most concisely in the late poem "Quandary":

That's why we need a lot of brains
If only to discriminate
'Twixt what to love and what to hate.

In his prose we might note his words to Louis Untermeyer in a letter dated "August Something," 1918 (*The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer* 75): "... I always hold that we get forward as much by hating as by loving. . . ."

²⁰ "The Poetry of Amy Lowell," *Selected Prose* 71-72.

reality and invention, truth and imagination, knowledge and emotion, feelings and ideas, as Frost so often does, and ends

This I saw when waking late,
Going by at a railroad rate,
Looking through wreaths of engine smoke
Far into the lives of other folk.

Only from the proper amalgamation of heart and mind can true seeing, can clear insight come about.

But are these three areas of resemblance and imitation the only tangential aspects of our two great poets? What more can we expect to find in common between a lyric poet of ancient Rome, an urbane, passionate proclaimer of love's immediacies, witty pursuer of wit, sharp, earthy satirist of the frivolities of the mighty and the less mighty, and an American teacher-poet of the twentieth century who lived most of his life with New England nature to become, by his own analogy with the external world, a seer of inner weather and confectioner of native similes? I think that there are still richer levels of mutuality than I have hitherto suggested.²¹ To illustrate this claim I would like to follow out in further detail the idea of "something" and read to you a poem dating probably from 1917 but first published in 1920, "For Once, Then, Something."²² It is another poem about sight and insight, written, as you will hear, in hendecasyllabics, a *tour de force* that seems to have given Frost some pleasure.²³ In a letter to G. R. Elliott, dated April 27, 1920, he suggests that the poem "is calculated to tease the

²¹ I leave for analysis elsewhere another area where the two poets overlap, namely their mutual dependence on the concrete, on the explicit realities of place and time, for their subject matter. I think, for instance, of the preeminence of home as symbol for each poet and of the concomitant idea of journey away from (or back to) home as metaphor for renunciation or rediscovery of self.

²² The poem was first published in *Harper's*, July, 1920. On the date of composition Thompson conjectures "Written in Franconia around 1917 . . ." (Thompson II 561). In a letter to Louis Untermeyer, written in Franconia and dated May 6, 1919 (*The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer* 86), Frost refers to the poem under the title "The Well":

I suspect my kids really like it ["The Runaway"], though Carol says it is not as good as my Well (a copy of which I may decide to enclose for comparison since you have probably forgotten you once saw it on my porch in Franconia).

(The poem was actually sent in Frost's next letter to Untermeyer, dated June 30, 1919, under the title "Wrong to the Light.") Frost had been living at the Herbert farm in Franconia, New Hampshire, since early June, 1915, when he had moved from rented rooms in the Lynch farm in Bethlehem (Thompson II 48). The sense of Frost's letter is that several years had passed between the time of the poem's composition and his present words to Untermeyer.

²³ Brower (*The Poetry of Robert Frost* 138) sees the meter as a bow to Catullus, as does Richard Poirier in his recent critique of Frost (*Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* [New York 1977] 252: ". . . Frost's affectionate nod to Catullus").

metrists.”²⁴ A year earlier, as he was no doubt still toying with it, writing from Franconia to his Amherst friend George Whicher, he plays with the metrical label at his own expense:²⁵

Between you and me I am having a lot of fun with *Hen Dekker*
syllables. You'd think I might be about something more profitable.
And we aren't farming much either.
And Elinor wouldn't let us hatch too many chickens.

As he wittily saw, it is an altogether appropriate form for the somewhat lackadaisical, ne'er-do-well poultryman to adopt as he went about his poetic vocation:

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs
Always wrong to the light, so never seeing
Deeper down in the well than where the water
Gives me back in a shining surface picture
Me myself in the summer heaven, godlike,
Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.
Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
Something more of the depths—and then I lost it.
Water came to rebuke the too clear water.
One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.

The poem studies the speaker's change from constant narcissism, from a superficial, reflexive self-satisfaction that sees only out and back, to a moment, once, of discernment beyond self and into richer perceptions. The “something,” which we first hear of as white and “more of the depths,” remains finally uncertain and the speaker at the last questions whether the moment of clarity had brought an abstract (truth) or a concrete (quartz) vision. The concluding “For once” can imply, separately or together, impatience at unfulfilled past performance or a sigh of accomplishment or of resignation. What remains secure is the “something” that both confirms and limits, announces discovery and controls expectation of grand namings.²⁶ Frost is one of the great poets of “something” and the word lies

²⁴ *Selected Letters* 248.

²⁵ Letter of Robert Frost to George F. Whicher, dated May 23, 1919, now in the Amherst College Library.

²⁶ Poirier (*Robert Frost* 300–301) writes as follows:

That word “something” is not simply an affectation of country talk to cover an uncouth bookishness. It also means what it says, namely anything, any kind of work done by anyone that can extend the capability of human dreaming.

prominently in his work as metaphor of mediation between ignorance and knowledge or understanding, worthlessness and value, the trifling and the substantial. It figures in his definition of the creative impulse which, in his *Paris Review* interview with Richard Poirier, he compares to a joke shared between passersby:²⁷

. . . you feel it rising in you, something to say as you pass each other.
Coming over him the same way. And where do these thoughts come
from? Where does a thought? Something does it to you. . . .

In "The Constant Symbol" Frost uses the same metaphor to define this imaginative "something":²⁸

When familiar friends approach each other in the street both are apt
to have this experience in feeling before knowing the pleantry they
will inflict on each other in passing.

But it is in his poetry that Frost makes the most suggestive use of the word. The reader who hears the opening line of "Mending Wall"—"Something there is that doesn't love a wall"—is being prepared for an education by poetry into the need for, or folly of, restraints between human beings, as the speaker gently chides his neighbor for lack of imagination and the inability to "go behind" the inherited learning he reiterates.²⁹ Or there is the more uncontrollable "something" at the end of "Good-by and Keep Cold" where the speaker, worrying out his orchard's combination of strength and vulnerability in winter through such distinctions as hot and cold, dark and light, distance and proximity, man's efforts and fortune's mutability, concludes: "But something has to be left to God."³⁰

He is referring in particular to "Take Something Like a Star," but his words are apt for most other Frostian uses.

Poirier is also aware of the importance of humor here and elsewhere in Frost. He speaks (252) of "the comic alliteration of 'w'" in the last two lines of "For Once, Then, Something." I would add that the whole of line 14 uses alliteration—"Blurred it, blotted it out . . ."—as a partially humorous "blurring" of high seriousness or trust in absoluteness. This relativity—Frost's "whatever"—has its kinship with the meaning as well as the effect of alliteration at the end of Catullus' first poem—*quare . . . quidquid . . . / quaecumque quod . . .*—which is also a humorous "diminishment" of exactitude.

²⁷ *Writers at Work* 33–34. Cf. also Cook, *Robert Frost* 166.

²⁸ "The Constant Symbol," *Selected Prose* 27.

²⁹ William Pritchard has some salient pages on "Mending Wall" in his recent essay on "Robert Frost: Elevated Play" (in *Lives of the Modern Poets* [New York 1980]). On the first line of the poem he writes (121): "Here the main accent could be on 'Something' or 'is' or 'doesn't' or 'love' or 'wall,' or on all of them more or less equally." I agree that by the time the first line is repeated at line 35 it has grown in significance, but even at the poem's start the clash between ictus and accent puts emphasis on "Something," the meaning of which is only gradually clarified.

³⁰ The relation of "something" to "truth" is also crucial to one of Frost's major early poems, "Mowing." In "Pod of Milkweed" "something" also defines a parallel inquisitiveness for knowledge.

In Frost's poetry "something" regularly suggests to the reader the explicit that lies behind the implicit, the richness of meaning in an object or event toward which words can only grope in the process of symbolification. Catullus' poetry also catalogues a repertoire of "somethings" but in a manner opposite to Frost's. The Roman poet will begin with the particular, examine it from multiple angles and allow the reader to sense its symbolic importance from the resultant distinctions.

We learn of Catullus' concern for *aliquid* from his first poem where Cornelius' thoughtful evaluation transforms the *nugae*, the poetic trifles of a self-ironic speaker, into something worthy of higher esteem. "Something" here, of course, appraises the poetry itself: Are the speaker's words mere fancies or are they of more enduring significance and, if so, for whom and why? But Cornelius' act of assessing words is incorporated as part of the larger gesture of the poem, excitedly in process from its initial question, namely the dedication of the *libellus*:

Cui dono lepidum novum libellum
Arido modo pumice expolitum?
Corneli, tibi

The book objectifies affection. It is an emblem of the unspoken "something" of the poem, made palpable in the compensatory gesture of warmth on the speaker's part which responds to—and includes—Cornelius' own refocussing of quality.³¹

As we attend the next poems we continue to be immersed in a world of somethings, of poetic bridging and conjunction. We first find a sparrow, plaything for unconcerned, shallow Lesbia, but a go-between shading erotically for the speaker into Lesbia herself. Then we have a boat whose tale of a journey home is metaphoric for the arousal and satisfaction of an emotion and for the passage from birth to old age. There follow poems on kisses, emblems of erotic unity that sequester mortal lovers from the chilling abridgements of time and place. Or, jumping to poem 12, we watch napkins, worthless in some eyes, emblematic of friendship to the speaker, or, in the next poems, an unguent given by speaker to guest, worth more than a banquet and capable of turning its recipient, via a miraculous synecdoche,

³¹ I am not forgetting the presence of irony through double tonality in poems like 1, to Cornelius Nepos, or 49, to Cicero. The referent would presumably take their hyperbole as flattery and the speaker's self-effacement as a valid manifestation of humility. The reader takes it as ironizing toward Nepos and Cicero (because they do not sense the duplicity of overstatement) and therefore as subtly asserting the superiority of Catullus. It is not only that his reputation rises as theirs falls, as the language of the factual historian or gilded rhetor is incorporated into that of the poet, symbolizing and making metaphor out of fact. He also has the wit to show their myopia, and therefore his insight into them, himself and his readers' fancies. So it is that the objects and personages that crowd Catullus' mental world can be interpreted, or seen, in so many different ways, depending on the perspective of the viewer.

into nothing but nose, and a volume of bad poems, sent by poet-friend to poet-friend, susceptible of a series of humorous and ironic “readings” and, at the end, standing as a symbol of their intimacy.³²

This repertoire of objective “somethings” is a constant representation of metaphor, figurative of those self-extensions by which Catullus reaches out to claim his world. A poet so bent on the reassurance of interconnectedness regularly poises his thoughts at moments of crisis. Time past merges with time present, ideal becomes real, sensation yields to reflection and truth is faced and understood, forcing the speaker toward attempted evasions of suffering or into acts of clear-headed analysis and acknowledgment. As an example we might choose the eighth poem, an exercise in self-torture where the apparently enlightened speaker addresses a Catullus still deep in pain. He warns that love’s bright suns no longer shine and demands steadfastness of his addressee, imputing to his girl the wretchedness we know to be Catullus’. Or there is poem 51, the imitation of Sappho, which stresses the speaker’s reliance on sight more than does the original, only to obliterate that sight by a marvelous hypallage (“my eyes are covered with twin night”), only, in turn, to devise a new final stanza which suddenly abstracts physical lack of vision into the possibility of insightful, terrifying self-understanding.

We may generalize from verses of such intensity—and the generalization is as apt for Frost as for Catullus—that the act of writing is the act of discovery of one’s self, or self-education and education into self. The leap from feeling to thinking is for both the cause as well as the subject matter of poetry. Poem after poem of Catullus documents a first-person speaker in the process of placing himself in his intellectual and spiritual setting. Such analytical powers, of course, are exercised on others who do not see themselves—from Suffenus, who mistakes surface for substance and quantity for quality, to Ameana, who demands money but cannot thoughtfully ask from her mirror the truth about herself, to the ignorant complacency of Egnatius with his constant, untimely smile or Arrius with his shrilly misplaced “h”s which denote utter self-unawareness. But the speaker (and the mimetic ruse of constant self-naming should not lure us into calling him Catullus),³³ watching himself or as seen by and with others, is Catullus’ chief concern.

Poem 44 offers an interesting example of detached self-appraisal. The addressee is Catullus’ farm which has cured him of a bad flu, but the way the *fundus* is described places Catullus as much as it does his property:

³² Words for the poet, of course, are the ultimate synecdoche, the final self-extension. In Catullus’ erotic poetry, the act of writing, as well as the seductive contents of that writing, is part of love-making. Poem 50 exemplifies the process from one to the other.

³³ See above, note 29.

. . . (nam te esse Tiburtem autumant, quibus non est
cordi Catullum laedere; at quibus cordi est
quovis Sabinum pignore esse contendunt), . . .

. . . for they consider you Tiburtine who have it at heart not to harm
Catullus; but those who have it at heart claim at whatever hazard
that you are Sabine.

His farm is emblem of the speaker himself; its civility or rusticity mirrors his own potential. Yet context, too, is crucial. It is important how this judgment is reached by others and for what purpose—to hurt or not to hurt. The speaker in Catullus' poetry regularly reaches out. Here, for a moment, the outside is looking in, but the "I" of the poem immediately aborts the reader's sense of his incipient paranoia. The Catullus of the poem slyly reveals the truth about himself. He is a person who deliberately peruses the bad speeches of one Sestius, for only then can he receive from him an invitation for a good dinner. The witty result—and the speaker realizes that he should have known it all along and tells us so—is that proximity to terrible writing only exposes one to a terrible cold! The poem unmasks the speaker for his own "rusticity" while proving him in fact brilliantly urbane, at once both immersed in and detached from his own foibles.

More often than not such revelations of self or others turn on questions of tone, primarily as distinguisher of truth from falsehood. Here is poem 73, one of the less often analyzed epigrams:

Desine de quoquam quicquam bene velle mereri
aut aliquem fieri posse putare pium.
omnia sunt ingrata, nihil fecisse benigne
<prodest,> immo etiam taedet obestque magis;
ut mihi, quem nemo gravius nec acerbius urget,
quam modo qui me unum atque unicum amicum habuit.

Cease to wish to deserve well in any respect of anyone or to think that someone can become pious. Everything is unappreciated, it is of no avail to have acted with kindness, indeed it has rather caused trouble and upset. Such is the case with me whom no one oppresses more grievously or cruelly than he who just now held me his one and only friend.

As general statement turns to specific, the poem's intensity grows, progressing toward the powerful last line, with its five elisions and marked alliteration, to a climax in the final word. *Habuit* eases quickly from its literal meaning, "held," to the abstraction, "considered." But the speaker is analyzing not only what his friend thought but what he proceeded then to say. In so doing he is re-thinking the exaggerated rhetoric of his friend's statement and pronouncing it a lie. Hence the typically Catullan moment of crisis, as wish and thought turn to honest realism, is here achieved through appraisal of spoken truth through tone of voice.

Dialogue is only implied in poem 73. The epigram is a monologue contemplating in retrospect a former conversation. But this exposure of tone as metaphor—how one is heard by others, how one hears others and oneself—occurs most often in Catullus through explicit dialogue. Poem 10 is a humorous example. Varus takes the speaker (who is addressed as Catullus within the poem) to meet his girlfriend. Though clearly a courtesan she is by all appearances charming and elegant. They fall into conversation and she goads the Catullus of the poem into saying that he possesses a litter that in fact has never been his. When she calls his bluff by asking to borrow it, he admits to being caught in a lie (the litter belonged to his friend Cinna) but ends by accusing the girl of being a boring sort because she had caught him off guard. In the middle of the poem, however, the narrator has taken the reader into his confidence by admitting to his boastful mendacity. What we have, then, is an interchange of narrator and girl (each sizing the other up) which is also a dialogue of narrator and reader, leaving three urbanities: the girl's, for besting the Catullus of the poem and proving herself quite witty in spite of the speaker's final petulant accusation, the speaker's, however, also, for self-perception while perceiving others and for commanding the reader's attention through the openness of self-distance, and the poet's, for crafting the apparent immediacy of colloquial conversation within the stringent form of hendecasyllabics.

This intense concern with dialogue, whether explicit or implicit, as a means of education by poetry, helps define perhaps the most forceful reason for intellectual kinship between Frost and Catullus. It also outlines one of the main distinctions between Catullus and Horace, the main concerns of whose addressees are seldom explained or shown to evolve by interlocation or its absence. Horace's second person is generally "you" as everyman, alert to the teachings of the speaking "I."³⁴ By contrast evolution through conversation is an imagined stance basic to Catullus' poems, long or short, polymetric or epigrammatic. Yet what remains salient in Catullus and so quickly absorbs the reader's attention is the speaker's constant colloquy with himself, someone to whom he often lends his own name. Poems regularly move from apostrophe to another to self-address. As the Sappho translation, for instance, changes from intense involvement to abstraction, the addressees change from Lesbia to a Catullus admonished by the speaker with analogies to contemplate the potential hazards of his situation.

Or poems can turn from self-address to apostrophe elsewhere. Poem 76, the longest of the so-called epigrams, is a case in point. It starts with the speaker reassuring Catullus that many joys remain to him over a long

³⁴ Ralph Johnson (*The Idea of Lyric* [Berkeley 1982] 127) rightly sees the Horatian addressee as metaphor for the reader.

time even from an unresponsive love, because he has honored the gods. In the more candid central section the speaker asks why Catullus continues to torture himself and demands an end to long love, whether (paradoxically) this is impossible or possible. The poem's closing segment begins and ends with a desperate call to the gods who alone can preserve the speaker from his ills. Self-approval gradually shifts to self-command and, finally, to prayerful trust elsewhere, as the poem runs its course. Only at the conclusion do we apprehend that the self-sufficiency is feigned, the self-control specious.

Critics have pointed out the imagistic parallels between the opening stanzas of poem 51 and the finale of poem 76 as the physical manifestations of love's mastering presence become clinical symptoms of a disease whose cure lies beyond the speaker's power.³⁵ The two poems form an intellectual continuum in other, allied respects. In the first poem, address to Lesbia, initiated by a speaker pronouncing himself the equal of or, dare he say, superior to the gods, yields to a warning generality as the speaker places his ingenuous hearer, Catullus, in a larger ideological context. The apostrophes of the second poem reverse this order, starting with Catullus and ending with the gods who now, far from serving as a lover's model for equivalence or even inferiority, form a very distinct, very independent entity, dispensing salvation only if they choose to accept the speaker's protestations of piety. The first poem posits a remove from the difficulties of the involved self, a remove made possible by a self-detachment which changes from ominous feeling into troubled knowing. In poem 76, by contrast, such detachment is valueless, leaving for the speaker only the dialogue of prayer—the last desperate type of interior discourse, between lonely self and god or the gods. The gods are the ultimate recourse not only at the failure of dialogue between self and others but more specifically and pronouncedly at the powerlessness of the interchange between self and self, where those apart can no longer aid or comfort the one involved.

We may see this constant resort to colloquy, especially self-colloquy, as a craftsman's charade, the apparently improvisatory that is only a technical device to shroud the deeply studied and carefully wrought. On whatever level we view it there is no question of its being a primary vehicle of the Catullan imagination. When in poem 63 Attis comes to his senses, displacing irrational devotion to Cybele by realization of how he (or she) is physically maimed, he immediately apostrophises his fatherland, true *creatrix* and *genetrix* by contrast to the corrupting *magna mater*. Ariadne begins her famous lament by accusing her lying lover and ends with a petition of vengeance to the Eumenides. The bulk of

³⁵ See, for instance, *Catullus: The Poems*, ed. by K. Quinn (London 1970) 409, on 76.19–21.

her words forms a series of vignettes that educate the speaker in reality, primarily in the reality of self. Yet, whether in the longer narratives or in shorter lyrics with a first person speaker, it is dialogue between inner and outer selves, between the ironic sentimentalist and the suffering, unenlightened naïf that is at the core of Catullus' interior world. This constant self-reflection seems a source for the poet's sorrow, impatience, and above all humor lavished on those who for whatever reason do not practice such internal scrutiny.

Herein, I think, lies the deepest reason for intimacy between Catullus and Robert Frost, an intimacy which Frost's brilliant use of Catullus' favorite meter only metaphorically confirms. William Pritchard has recently spoken of Frost as "this century's most humorous poet."³⁶ He means humor, of course, not only as ready wit but in a wider sense, as the self-knowledge that can appreciate with understanding the eccentricities of oneself and of one's surroundings. How better to illustrate this quality than in the search for voice tones, for how words are spoken and comprehended. Richard Poirier, in his fine book on Frost, puts the matter succinctly:³⁷

Voice is the most important, distinguishing, and conspicuously insistent feature of Frost's poetry and of his writing about poetry. There is scarcely a single poem which does not ask the reader to imagine a human character equivalent to the movement of voice and there is no other poet in English of whom this is so emphatically the case.

One thinks immediately of the great narratives in *North of Boston* such as "The Death of the Hired Man," or "Home Burial," about a husband and wife, reacting to the burial of their child, whose interchanges reveal how they see, or do not see, into each other's ways of feeling and expressing. But in lyric after masterful lyric appreciation of tone is vital. Take, for example, the sonnet "Design" where a spider, perched on white heal-all, holds his prey, the moth, in a design of darkness. Since these "assorted characters of death and blight" are "mixed ready to begin the morning right," the conversational, Madison Avenue jargon comments with macabre irony on the actual subject matter. This commentary is further ironized by the auditory play on morning (mourning) and right (rite), as if breakfast for humans was, in the animal world, a necessary, natural funeral ceremony.³⁸ As with Catullus the fascination with tone is on Frost's part equally complemented by the constantly dialogic quality of his work. It is readily

³⁶ *New York Times Book Review* (Dec. 20, 1981) 6.

³⁷ *Robert Frost* 146.

³⁸ It is notable that the poem "Voice Ways" (which begins "Some things are never clear . . ."), about the addressee's characteristic "sweet-cynical strain," precedes "Design" in *A Further Range*, as if a reminder of how to hear while reading would not be out of place before appreciating the sonnet.

apparent in such poems as “Two Look at Two,” “All Revelation” (“Eyes seeking the response of eyes / bring out the stars . . .”) or “The Most of It” about a speaker in search of a truly answering human nature. Sound provides the basic metaphor of the poem, distinguishing honest love from solipsism in the contention between self-generated echo and “original response.”

Aspects of speaking are equally important to “For Once, Then, Something” to which we must return for a concluding look. You remember the opening lines:

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs
Always wrong to the light. . . .

Frost, like Catullus, is regularly a creator of speakers who are watching or being watched, as conscious of others’ feelings about them as they are about their own. In this case the initial lines imply a set of interlocutors who chide the speaker for not penetrating beyond life’s superficialities, literal or ideological. But the word “Others” is so striking a beginning that it suggests dialogue of a different sort which I have only hinted at before. In “The Prerequisites” Frost produces two *obiter dicta* that we can use here: first, “A poem is best read in the light of all the other poems ever written” and second, “The thing is to get among the poems where they hold each other apart in their places as the stars do.”³⁹ Let us take Frost at his word’s narrowest, getting in “among the poems” in a way that the order in which his poems are preserved does not demand or, in most instances, even advocate for Catullus. We will look at “For Once, Then, Something” in dialogue with one other poem, its predecessor, which happens to be Frost’s most famous poem, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.”⁴⁰ I will presume on your patience with one last reading:

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.

³⁹ *Selected Prose* 97.

⁴⁰ We have already observed the potential for dialogue between adjacent poems (see note 38 above). We should note that in the arrangement of *Aforesaid* (1954) “For Once, Then, Something” is placed between “Looking for a Sunset Bird in Winter,” with the speaker’s final sighting of a star, and “Spring Pools,” with its parallel imagery of blotting out.

The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

The dialectic between the poems is created through opposites and similarities.⁴¹ First the opposites. One is a winter poem, the other set in summer. "Stopping by Woods" is concerned with darkness—darkest evening, dark woods. "For Once, Then, Something" contemplates light and clear water in the search for "something white," "that whiteness." The alluring darkness of one poem is replaced in the other by a series of brightnesses, the wrong "shining surface picture" that images the speaker's limiting self-satisfaction and the final flash of clarity with its multiplicity of meanings. Yet each in diverse ways is a poem about depths—about deep woods, or about "seeing / Deeper down in a well" to discover "Something more of the depths." The first defines a moment of retreat from commitment, a yielding, perhaps, to the impulses of romanticism, to dream before true sleep is earned. The second turns from a variation of this self-seduction toward penetration into understandings of life beyond immediate gratification of the self. The postponed responsibilities of "miles to go" become in the subsequent poem simply the search for truth. Both poems turn on the image of shaking. When the little horse shakes his harness, he starts to break the trance that holds the speaker stopped, as if to urge him to move on toward keeping his promises.⁴² The drop of water that "shook whatever lay there at bottom" shatters the speaker's attempt at final discernment or, better, drives his thoughts from literal to figurative, from reliance on the

⁴¹ "Out, Out—" can only be fully appreciated by comparison with Macbeth's famous speech in act 5, scene 5 of Shakespeare's tragedy. "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is another excellent example of Frost's dialogue with other poets in the creation of his verse. In this case I suggest that Frost was drawn to, and was reacting from, Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale." Both poems end with their last four lines rhyming "sleep" with "deep." The word "bell," literally (Frost) or as metaphor (Keats), begins the recalling of the speaker from retreat or dream to reality. In one case trees and a forest dim, embalmed darkness and easeful death help sustain the theme. In the other we find woods, darkness and easy wind. For one poet the allure of the nightingale's song suggests the obliteration of the senses in death. For the other the attraction to stop and watch snow falling in woods is a temptation into one's sole self and away from "keeping" and "going." We must also remember that the romanticism of Keats' renunciation is tempered by realization that in the poem itself he has created an earthly object of stunning beauty.

⁴² This assertion needs qualification because the "practical" voice is already apparent in the poem's opening stanza. The speaker thinks and knows quite explicit information. Hence the interplay of two voices, the realistic and the romantic, runs through the poem to the end, where "miles to go" can be heard in either way. The poem embodies, without ever resolving, the tension between the two. In a sense it is about itself, about two different but interacting ways of seeing and describing the world.

immediate and visible to questioning the latter's meaning and, at the last, pronouncing on its limitation.

The reader, therefore, who goes from one poem to the next, when the second begins "Others," might be led to suspect that the contents of the preceding poem would reveal by innuendo a different set of reasons why the speaker's extraordinary stance suffers the conventional world's rebuke. The speaker of "Stopping by Woods" is exposed to ridicule for running away from life, reveling in loneliness or selfishly giving in to the entrancements of the moment instead of, oppositely, for taking himself with too much satisfaction and myopically glorying in a self-esteem whose restrictions are manifest to "others." The implicit debate between the speaker and a second party is also posited at the opening of "Stopping by Woods." What would the owner of the woods think were he to see the speaker stopping and watching? The speaker should perhaps be where the owner is, in the village, the only proper place to "see" from—at least according to ordinary standards—on a snowy, dark evening. This guilt at his action (or inaction) is made explicit in the "thought" the speaker imputes to the one actual witness to the scene: "My little horse must think it queer. . . ." It is the animal, with realism if not rationalism, who reminds the mesmerized speaker of duties unfinished and "miles to go."

It is unfortunate that the corpus of Catullus' poetry, as we have inherited it from antiquity, does not offer the critic the rewards that he can claim from exploring Frost through the dialogue of juxtaposed poems. But even when separated at some distance two related Catullan poems, such as 51 and 76, can exemplify, as I hope to have illustrated, their author's fascination with dialogue and with the voice tones that are crucial to its expression. It is this fascination that forms the greatest intellectual bond between the Roman poet and his twentieth-century admirer.

Frost, at least from the podium and in his prose work, was not a believer in practical criticism. In one of his Bread Loaf talks he accuses the poet-translator-critic John Ciardi, whose reading of "Stopping by Woods" was one of the first to interpret it as a disguised death wish, of "making a public spectacle of me."⁴³ And in "The Prerequisites" he briskly disposes even of pedagogy: "Being taught poems," he says, "reduces them to the rank of information."⁴⁴ He voices no tolerance for the notion that the critic, as well as the poet, can be even a modest representative of the "taste and judgment" he considered crucial for an education by literature.⁴⁵ Yet I

⁴³ The essay, "Robert Frost: The Way to the Poem," appeared in *The Saturday Review* for April 12, 1958, 13–15 and 65. Frost commented at Bread Loaf, June 30, 1958 (Cook 122).

⁴⁴ *Selected Prose* 96–97.

⁴⁵ "Education by Poetry," *Selected Prose* 35. See also E. Barry, *Robert Frost on Writing* (New Brunswick 1973) 6–7.

suspect that he might be pleased by the juxtaposition I have been trying to make. In a letter of 18 April, 1932, Frost writes to his future son-in-law Willard Fraser:⁴⁶

Archaeology is one of the four things I wanted most to go into in life, archaeology, astronomy, farming and teaching Latin.

This list may seem somewhat anti-climactic to those not privy to the wonders of the classicist's world. Yet thirty years later, in the summer before he died, Frost expands and focusses his remark. He is making one of the last recorded glosses on the star of "Take Something Like a Star":⁴⁷

And I often think it's Catullus. I get out Catullus when I'm too bothered about my having been wrong in politics. When I voted wrong—and voted wrong with the mob and everything—[I] read Catullus, and astronomy is like that to me and so is hoeing and so on.

These are Frost's great areas for delving—into the earth, into the remains of our past, into the steadying heavens and into a superb language and one of its finest artisans. In spite of Frost's mistrust of interpretation, he might agree that to teach Latin and to read Catullus, the one of which he wanted to do, the other of which he did with regularity, is to adopt the role of the teacher–reader–critic which needs no defense before the illustrious members of this gathering. A major, ever more crucial duty of our profession is to pursue the task of keeping great humanistic texts alive by putting new questions to them, extending their mysteries and reviewing their moral significance. To do so we have at our disposal a steadily enriching panoply of methodologies. Our outreach, from Catullus to Frost to our students, must be as wide-ranging as possible. We have a considerable responsibility, in a time of deep uncertainty and of social upheavals as profound as any in recorded history, to scrutinize, revalue, preserve and communicate to, and for, the future, the quality of one of the major *corpora* of western thought. The more homogeneous, the more visually rather than verbally oriented our society grows, the more difficult becomes our role and the less useful its appearance to those who find that the lessons of history have little to say. The critic himself survives only momentarily vis-à-vis the enduring objects of his examination. His very limitations, his fleeting place amid personal, social, or historical change, is one of the strongest arguments against a positivistic approach to the analysis of texts. But these circumscriptions do not make his task as continuator of civilization any less significant. Even in moments of worry about the future we can only rejoice in the magnificence of the masterpieces with which we are privileged to deal. We must be cheered, not daunted, by their inexhaustibility.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Selected Letters* 385 (on which see Thompson II 401).

⁴⁷ From a talk at Bread Loaf, July 2, 1962 (Cook 191).

⁴⁸ I am grateful to Professors Helen Bacon and George Monteiro and to Mr. John Lancaster, of the Amherst College Library, for their help.