

Catullus, Pliny, and Love-Letters

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I would like to examine literature and love.¹ In particular, I shall focus on the relationship between epistles and desire: hence the title “Love-Letters.” We shall begin with the problem of love and the epistle, but I would like to move from there to a more general examination of the ways in which desire is interconnected with literary culture. There is on the one side the love-letter that the lover sends as a missive to the beloved, and on the other literature in general and its relation to desire. In order to bridge the gap between these two versions of love-letters, we will examine the literary practice of the poet Catullus and the man of affairs and sometime letter-writer Pliny. One might suppose at first glance that these two authors would have diametrically opposed relations to love and literature, where Catullus is the lover in verse and Pliny is the rather dry man of letters in prose. Similarly, one might suspect that an author writing in the 50s B.C.E. might diverge radically in the spirit of his literary ethos from one who flourished in the 100s C.E. But I would like to show how the epistles that both authors send come to represent the whole project of literary production and consumption. And these letters, we shall see, do not just express desire; they also inculcate and manage a whole social economy of pleasures. This economy of the letter does not just cover exchanges in the socio-political dimension, but also encompasses a psychic economy regulating intersubjective relations as well as one’s relationship to the self. These two dimensions, though, are not segregated; and one finds in these letters the ledgers and accounts that would verify the solvency of Roman masculine identity. In this fashion one writes of love, because, in a sense, it cannot be helped: all literary culture falls under the sign of desire and this desire is a force ordering the social and psychic accounts of the world.

This reading may at first glance seem somewhat impolite, and perhaps it is even needlessly salacious to the extent that it demands that the letter be a confession of love. In the end, however, such a reading is only impolite inasmuch as it takes a boor to express in blunt terms what more cultured tastes

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would leave sublimely unsaid. These letters and their love resist this vulgar reading, precisely because one of their tasks is to deflect certain pleasures away from the brash voicing of desire. The indecorousness of this argument, then, is of a curious sort: it is sinister or gauche precisely in the act of describing the “right” way of doing things. The love-letter negotiates this relationship between erotic desire and respectable culture so as to put the unromantic critic in the position of the unlovable clod. To question is to lose the magic of the literary Eros that our texts inscribe. The man of culture loves otherwise.

The love-letter structures the field of love and literature so as to ensure this and other consequences. First, it produces a vision of the two as necessarily united. One only loves under the sign of culture. The text itself performs this union. Hence a reading that would pull these terms apart seems to invite attack on two fronts for misunderstanding either the letter as simply erotic or the sentiment as mere literary posturing. The sensitive critic is hereby condemned to be a philologist in the etymological sense: his comprehension of the letter participates in the terms and the mutual relationship of these terms coordinated by the letter. This sensitive reader is invited to mistake his prurient eavesdropping—what did they really do, those two?—for participation in the conversion of affect into literature. The genteel virility that the ancient texts argue towards thus steers the brassy task of interpretation towards the reproduction of the letters’ desired ethos. And this ethos is desired in a variety of senses.

The vocabulary has become confusing. Why the ambiguity? What does it mean to describe a love-letter as desiring something, and especially as desiring an ethos? A letter might only be thought to desire legibility, to desire to be readable and to be read. This is, in its way, a generic condition for the letter: “You are absent; I write that you may read.” Hence every letter is a love-letter in a philosophical sense: it is predicated on lack and absence and it would use the word to effect this originary non-being from which it emerges: the letter desires a recuperation of being. The letter passes between two individuals as an agent that would communicate the one to the other. It seeks to install a presence in the place of an absence and to exchange for a desire predicated on lack a love based in language and the community of letters.²

The social and psychic implications of this rough schema can be better approached and explored in greater detail by reading some letters by a pair of

²One can compare Plato’s *Symposium* and the speech of Socrates/Diotima where love is an intermediary whose essence is constituted by lack. The structure of the symposium proper and even of the elaborate repetitions in Plato’s narrative frame also have resonances with the version of love-letters I offer here.

long-departed Latin authors. Catullus' poetic letter allows us to see in love and literature a bond that must be forged for the identity of a poetic persona to emerge. Moreover, this persona turns upon the endless oscillation between lack and presence as the space of ambiguous quasi-being in which literary intersubjectivity can be explored. Similarly Pliny insists upon a sexual ethics of literature by way of a letter. The erotic economy of letters needs constant maintenance and its instability invites the endless and anxious intervention of the moralizing pen. Here love and lack must be directed away from a wanton society of literature or the threatened carnality that lurks in the moment of exchange between two individuals. Instead Pliny seeks a community of letters that reproduces the authority and name of an always lost father by way of citations of proper, virile substitutes. The psychic landscape in Pliny recapitulates stereotypical injunctions that seek to inaugurate the child into the world of culture while moving through and past unspeakable desires. Pliny puts Catullus' intersubjective literary desire onto a moralized axis. The emergence of the subject in the love-letter that we shall find in Catullus has at once applied to it the legislation of this subject and of desire. The erotics of the scene is thereupon employed to forge a cathexis to social destiny as found in the society of élite males.

Catullus 50 seems like a good place to begin this odyssey. This poem takes the form of a verse letter to the orator C. Licinius Calvus Macer.³ I would like to offer a translation of this poem, but with the proviso in place that this translation already assumes several of the points towards which I wish to argue. So, here is the poem:

Hesterno, Licini, die otiosi	
multum lusimus in meis tabellis,	
ut convenerat esse delicatos:	
scribens versiculos uterque nostrum	
ludebat numero modo hoc modo illoc,	5
reddens mutua per iocum atque vinum.	
atque illinc abii tuo lepore	
incensus, Licini, facetiisque,	
ut nec me miserum cibus iuaret,	
nec somnus tegeret quiete ocellos,	10
sed toto, indomitus furore, lecto	
versarer cupiens videre lucem,	

³For poem 50 as a letter, see Syndikus 250 and his bibliography. Syndikus compares Cic. *Att.* 9.10.1 and *Fam.* 7.22, while prudently reminding us that this letter is decidedly literary as well: "das Gedicht diente nicht einem praktischen Zweck, einer dringenden Einladung des Freundes, sondern einem poetischen Zweck, der Darstellung einer Dichterfreundschaft und dem Bekenntnis zu ihr."

ut tecum loquerer, simulque ut essem.
 at defessa labore membra postquam
 semimortua lectulo iacebant, 15
 hoc, iucunde, tibi poema feci,
 ex quo perspiceres meum dolorem.
 nunc audax cave sis, precesque nostras,
 oramus, cave despuas, ocelle,
 ne poenas Nemesis reposcat a te. 20
 est vemens dea: laedere hanc caveto.

Yesterday, Licinius, idling
 we long played upon my pages:
 we had decided to consult our pleasure.
 Each writing light verses,
 we sported now in this meter, now in that.
 Jest and drink sparked our give and take.
 And so I left your house; but your charm
 had set me ablaze, Licinius, and your wit as well:
 poor me, you made me lose my appetite,
 nor would sleep bring peace to my eyes.
 Instead wild, raving, the whole bed
 felt me toss and turn, lusting to see the dawn:
 then I could speak, could be together with you.
 But my limbs, spent with the effort, later
 sprawled limp and half-dead upon my bed,
 and I wrote for you, my delight, this poem,
 so that it would reveal to you my heart-ache.
 Now, brave soul, take care: my prayers—
 please—take care not to scorn them, my darling,
 lest Nemesis take vengeance upon you.
 The goddess is potent: beware ye who offend her.

Charm, lust, sleepless nights, darling: the translation is rather spicy. At the other extreme one can render this same poem in the most Victorian of terms. Ellis in his 1889 commentary does just this: the poem for him is only about poetry and poetic rivalry. For Ellis it is the contest itself that excites Catullus to the point of distraction. The poem written in response to this evening of competition becomes, in Ellis' words, "a return-invitation."⁴ Ellis' reading leaves everything at the politest level: friends go to dinner; they engage in some light, refined amusement; one of them has a particularly good time; he invites the other back to his house for another genteel evening.⁵ One might attribute Ellis' politeness

⁴Ellis 171–72. Friedrich 233, though, argues that the meeting was at neither man's house. The return one seeks, then, would only be to the scene of writing in general without reference to proprietorship of place.

⁵See Bardon 1970: 120ff. for the theme of solitude as the moment from which Catullus' poetry emerges.

to the manners of his age were it not that Quinn does Ellis one better in his 1970 commentary.⁶ There Quinn suggests that the evening described was a first meeting. If Quinn is right, this seems to have been a particularly racy first date: nearly every line is packed with the diction of erotic verse.⁷

The repetition of *ludere* might mean merely “to have a good time.” *Ocelle* could just be a bland word of affection. In both cases, though, there are many clear parallels throughout Latin elegy where sexual sport and glancing are designated by these two words. If we start with an erotic reading of these words and hold fast to this reading for the rest of the poem, an interesting nexus emerges, binding literature to desire.⁸

Pointedly idle, turning away from business or *negotium* and towards ease, leisure, and sport, the men play. Segal argued that the tone is almost “defiantly frivolous”⁹ and singled out ease (*otium*) as one of the keys to the poem. But for a poet, and especially this poet, *otium* at once becomes *negotium*.¹⁰ As Catullus idles, he immediately gets down to work: he writes poetry; he falls in love; he writes some more poetry. The two spheres collapse and there is no radical distinction for our Catullus. Or, better still, there is a logical progression: poetry incites love which incites love-poetry. If work is the site of man’s self-realization, as Marx or Hegel would argue, then idleness clearly is Catullus’ work, the place where he discovers himself as himself, and the scene where he performs this self.¹¹ In the formulation “poetry makes love which makes love-

⁶Quinn 1970 *ad loc.* Compare Quinn 1972: 277–80 for a corresponding biographical reading and deprecation of the erotic diction. Scott argues similarly.

⁷The erotic vocabulary is noted in Syndikus 252–54. Compare Seager. Arkins 30 usefully notes that “it is not necessary to posit a homosexual relationship between Catullus and Calvus or to regard all this as a parody in order to read the poem correctly....[I]t is entirely understandable that this writing of risqué verse should induce in [Catullus] a quasi-sexual longing for Calvus which is couched in sexual images and language.” See also Fitzgerald 428–29.

⁸Adler 78 argues that love (*amor*) and friendship (*amicitia*) act as mutual metaphors in Catullus and specifically addresses this poem as playing upon the ambiguous intersection of the two (83). Compare Buchheit 170ff. Also Hubbard 1984: 42 notes that in poem 68 a literary and an amatory gift (a *munus Musarum* and a *munus Veneris*) are conjoined in the verse letters passed between friends. See also Janan 7 on literature and desire in Catullus. The whole of her study asks similar questions of Catullus as does the present essay with its focus on a single poem. Her summary of psychoanalysis and its relevance to Catullus is a valuable contribution to the criticism of the poet. My own divergences from Janan stem mainly from a slightly different focus within psychoanalytic criticism, a relative indifference to the Lesbia cycle, and from the incorporation of some of Derrida’s critiques of psychoanalysis.

⁹Segal 25.

¹⁰Compare Buchheit 165.

¹¹I am ignoring the problem of the relationship between the “real” Catullus and his poetic persona. Instead, I am arguing that all Romans face the problem of the self as a mask presented to the inspection of others. Literary expression only mirrors this mirroring effect of

poetry,” in fact, we have a perfect dialectical movement in the philosophical sense: literature’s encounter with desire produces a transformation of both into a new form that displaces the prior ones even as this form contains within itself the traces of its origin. This is our love-letter, a hyphenated and hybrid form that both raises up and supersedes both love and the letter.

In order to appreciate better Catullus’ movement from letters to love to love-letters, let us take a closer look at the text of the poem. In Catullus 50 the verses themselves are described with the same diminutives that cluster about the eyes and the bed. In line 4, diminutives, often associated with elegy and with elegy specifically as love poetry, overtake the verses of many meters and convert them all into the erotic and elegiac mode. These little verses upset Catullus’ little eyes and set his limbs to tossing on his little bed in lines 10 and 15. The chain leads from the waxen tablet into the boudoir, or, to force a modern pun onto the situation, from one sort of sheets to another.¹²

Catullus, or at least his poetic persona, is lovesick. He tosses and turns. He can’t eat. He is frantic with desire. His desire is to see, specifically to see the light. But seeing the light is only a prelude to another version of seeing, namely seeing Calvus again. Catullus’ restless eyes want only to see this one sight. Interestingly, though, seeing brings us back to the eyes in another way. Note that in line 19 Calvus is given the vocative “my eye,” *ocelle*. The eye’s desired object here is called the eye itself. Subject and object fuse in the consummation of this optics of desire.¹³

But subject and object fuse yet again at another level. This poem’s subjects are Calvus’ verses and the whole scene of writing. But the poem, Catullus’ poem, is also the object of these two forces. It is the product of the effect of Calvus and writing on Catullus. Thus, as Catullus’ eye is first his own and then is found to be Calvus’, so also does the whole of the poetic text slide away from us. In a sense there is no first poem or moment of origin: there is a dialectic of erotic literature in which Catullus discovers himself as a desiring subject. Catullus leaves Calvus’ house and the latter’s verses begin to be transformed into Catullus’ verselets (*versiculos*). Catullus is inflamed by Calvus, not satisfied by him. As he retreats, though, the flames grow keener: the further Catullus withdraws, the more he feels both desire and lack: the solitary

alterity and hence provides a space for the further exploration of issues arising in intersubjective relations. See Hubbard 1984 for similar arguments.

¹²Arkins 30 offers a similar summary of the poem’s images.

¹³Compare Pl. *Alc.* 1.132e2–133b6 on the optics of seeing oneself in the pupil of the eye (κόρη) of the other whom one observes. The effect is explicitly likened to that of a mirror (ὥσπερ ἐν κατόπτρῳ).

bed is the scene of the keenest torments. The only cure for this situation, we are told, is reunion: the coming light of day becomes the return of Calvus, and Calvus' presence is expressly conflated with the return of his voice. In fact, the return is to the original moment of desire: Catullus and Calvus will exchange words again. As Catullus writes it, he wants to talk and to be with Calvus. Catullus' voice and existence have been discovered as the voice and life of a man in love. They are so discovered in the very process of literary exchange and interchange found in the first meal and reiterated by poem 50 as a whole. *Reddens mutua*, "our give and take," from line 6 here becomes the keynote of the poem and of life. Catullus will perform this new truth, this life as love-letter, when he is with Calvus again. Or so, at least, this love-letter promises us.

The question remains, though, will the second parting be any less traumatic than the first? Line 8 is clear: Catullus is ablaze, and Calvus' culture, his charm and wit—his *lepos* and *facetiae*—are to blame. Will not every meeting with this elegant man produce the same result? Will not *lepore* and *furore* always be yoked in life as they are in verse? Charles Segal in 1970 argued of this poem that Catullus is "a man who feels his literary expression as something sensual."¹⁴ I would like to examine the extent to which this passion is not just Catullus', but is instead a passion felt by all men of letters and a passion expressed in letters that incite desire as they express it. The charm (*lepos*) of Calvus recalls the charming little book (*lepidus libellus*) that we are ourselves reading.¹⁵ Indeed this very poem and its literary culture ought to excite us as well. The erotics of the literary project is meant not just to suffuse the poetic scene of writing it records, or even the Catullan corpus as a whole; instead, charm and wit extend out into all of literary society; and this is a society in which Catullus' own readers are meant to participate. We all know that poetry can be erotic and that Catullus' verses are particularly provocative. In this case we can accuse the poet only of making explicit and tangible a situation that persists more broadly in Roman culture. Catullus, then, was not so much borrowing the metaphors of love when he described literature as he was

¹⁴Segal 25. Compare Scott for the flames of wit Catullus feels as a displacement for the flames of love. Clack, though, is not convinced by this last argument and is determined to make this poem's witty and sexy discussions of an afternoon be conversations about Catullus' love for Lesbia as inferred from the next poem. Fitzgerald is prudently impatient with such efforts to rescue Catullus from intimations of homosexual desire.

¹⁵Hubbard 1983 would see the "little book" or *libellus* as only the first fourteen poems. Nevertheless, the homology between the friend and the text persists even if our Catullan collection is not the *libellus* announced in poem 1; and the first poem of our collection well introduces the whole of Catullus' works. Fitzgerald 421–24 sees a euphemized erotic teasing in poem 1. On this first poem, compare also note 32 below.

acceding to a desire inhering within literature and then writing a vivid literary scene from it.¹⁶

It is within this context that we can approach a textual problem that befalls Catullus' page. Should line 2 read *meis* or *tuis*, are the writing tablets mine or yours?¹⁷ Whose were the tablets? And whose is the poem we now read? The questions may seem to be of different orders, but they converge within the movement of the poem. Poem 50 constructs the conditions of impossibility for the correct emendation of the line because, in a sense, possession is always mendacious here. The tablets cannot properly belong to either of the men, since the poem is exploring the theme of mutual appropriation. The two men pass the tablets to and fro. They each write on the tablet for the other to read; but then the other presumably effaces the prior text and inscribes his own to be given back to the first party.¹⁸ In this schema, though, there is no first party nor a first poem. The tablets contain only the previous poem, soon to give way at another moment to a succeeding poem. Similarly, the tablets only rest in one man's hands so that they may be passed back to the other. One claims both tablet and text as one's own only in the moment of passing it to the other and giving it away. Alienation and appropriation converge here, and the text and its medium are sent away so that "you" can recognize it as "mine" once it is yours and no longer mine.¹⁹ The poem as a whole obeys the same logic. It is Catullus', it is "my poem" just as it is "my book," *meum carmen* and *meus libellus*. But this poem is sent out as a letter to Calvus. As a gift to Calvus it becomes his at the moment that he recognizes the hand of Catullus, that it is the other's and not his own.

Moreover, Catullus is playing *fort/da* with Calvus himself. *Fort/da* is the name of the famous "first game" of the little boy in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

I eventually realized that it was a game and that the only use he made of any of his toys was to play "gone" with them. One day I made an observation which confirmed my view. The child had a wooden reel

¹⁶Fitzgerald examines the sexual enticements Catullus offers his readers through his verses in general.

¹⁷The conjecture of Schwabe, "or is it 'on your' (an *in tuis*)," is found in the *apparatus criticus* of both Mynors' Oxford edition and Bardon's Teubner text (Bardon 1973). Bardon 1970 offers an extensive discussion of this whole theme of "le «moi» et le «tu»" in Catullus.

¹⁸One might compare Freud's Mystic Writing pad which obeys a similar logic (Freud 1963 [1925]). The pad, though, represents memory, where the tablets here serve to institute oneself as recognized and recognizable. Thereupon one can then also become memorable. One needs in particular, though, the moment of exchange of the tablet.

¹⁹Fitzgerald 431–32 offers remarks on the erotic connotations of publication for Catullus.

with a piece of string tied to it.... What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it.... He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful “*da*” [“there”]. This, then, was the complete game—disappearance and return.²⁰

The Calvus who left is made by the text to appear and disappear all over again, but this time at the end of Catullus’ own poetic spindle. Catullus makes Calvus come and go, and this motion parallels the coming and going of the tablets that inaugurated the amatory crisis. The final departure of Calvus himself causes Catullus to spin out the thread of this poem that should draw Calvus back for a joyous return: “*da*.” It is not surprising, then, that a bed takes up the middle of the poem. The movement of men and words necessarily passes through and past this piece of furniture without being either exhausted or satisfied by it. Being in bed with Calvus would be no better than being in bed with Calvus’ poems, since being in bed with this poem, poem 50, is a surrogate for that act, and this poem insists upon the necessity not of possession but of alienation.²¹ Casting his lines of verse over and past this bed, Catullus ultimately plays with his own appearance and disappearance, not with Calvus.’ This corresponds to the final version of the child’s game in Freud: the child makes himself appear and disappear in the mirror near his bed.²²

This last image recalls Lacan’s essay on the “mirror stage” as formative of the ego.²³ Lacan there presents an infant before a mirror. The child uses his own *imago* to compose for himself out of a fragmentary sense of his body an ego corresponding to this unified image of a bodily self presented to him in the mirror: this moment of self-mastery thus requires that an image of another body, an *alter-ego*, be given to the self.²⁴ One could see in the invocation of Calvus as poet the manufacture of the image, an *alter-ego* whereby Catullus coordinates his image of himself via a relation to a projected image of himself that returns to him from without.²⁵ The vehicle of all of these “optics,” though, is language and

²⁰Freud 1961: 14. The whole of the scene can be found in Freud 1961: 13–17.

²¹See Lacan 1977c: 100–104.

²²Freud 1961: 14 n. 6.

²³See Lacan 1977d. In this case the text of the poem that enables and supports the author’s staging of himself as a spectacle for himself acts as either cradle, à la Freud, or Lacan’s *trotte bébé*.

²⁴Lacan will later summarize how the ego (*moi*) coordinates itself by way of reference to the image of the other (*autre*) as follows: “[H]ere you have *m*, the ego, and *a*, the other which isn’t an other at all, since it is essentially coupled with the ego, in a relation which is always reflexive, interchangeable—the *ego* is always an *alter-ego*.” (Lacan 1988b: 321 [original emphasis]).

²⁵Thus one can compare to that first mirror the convex mirror in Lacan 1988a: 137–42 and 146–47. One might then also say of the poems that they modulate the angle of incidence of Lacan’s mirrors and hence structure the sort of image of oneself that comes back to the ego. It

the language of poetry. Thus the self-image with which we are dealing is profoundly implicated with the function of language *per se*, implicated with the notion that language as well offers a grammatical “I” that ultimately underwrites the question of the ego as aware of and structured by its own semblances.²⁶

In this fashion Catullus writes autobiography. He does not write his autobiography, though, in the more familiar sense of the notion: possessives have come to mean little at this point. Rather writing is itself autobiography; writing is writing the self, self-production in and through writing.²⁷ The self is performed as a thing written and sent off to another who is destined to return the text and the self to its proper owner/author; and poem 50 performs this very logic in which it participates.

This last observation, though, recalls Derrida’s critique of the Freudian scene and, ultimately, of the Lacanian revision. Though some might argue that psychoanalysis is not necessarily so blind as Derrida claims, Derrida is justified in insisting that psychoanalysis fails to foreground rigorously its own participation in the object of knowledge it would constitute.²⁸ Derrida objects that Freud establishes the conditions of possibility for the game of *fort/da* by installing himself as author in a position where he plays the very same game with the boy’s own sport. This game of presence and absence thus directly participates in the problem of authorship as a question of writing: we are not merely dealing with a problem of bodily images. Catullus’ relationship to Calvus collapses for us a split that psychoanalytic theory has allowed itself to open up: a poem about a “self-fashioning” meeting of the writer as an author playing in verses with another author cannily comes to us in a self-fashioning poem. In Derridian terms, there is no radical break between the moment of finding oneself in the appearance and disappearance of the other and the act of writing about the same. The formation of the ego that appears as the author and origin of its own meaning thus comes as a moment of return, of writing, and

is worth mentioning that Lacan’s relationship to this scene of the mirror stage evolves throughout his own career: indeed Lacan 1981: 105–19 offers yet another important reworking of the optical apparatus. For present purposes, though, I am more interested in what complements the discussion of presence and absence in both Catullus and Freud than in seeking an impossible Lacanian “orthodoxy.”

²⁶Lacan sees Freud’s great breakthrough to be the de-centering and dispossession of the ego by way of the idea of the unconscious. Lacan sees his own most important contribution to Freudianism to be an insistence that the unconscious operates according to the rules of the linguistic signifier. The relationship between ego and unconscious is thus rewritten as a problem of the ego’s relationship to the function of language, or the so-called Symbolic order.

²⁷Compare Derrida 322 on Freud writing autobiography in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

²⁸See Derrida 391–95.

of writing about mutual returns. Catullus seems to be perfectly aware of these paradoxes of the written self.

The reader of poem 50 is faced with a moment of recognition just like that expected of Calvus: "The poem is mine. I read it. I know what it says; but I know it as yours, Catullus, as uniquely yours." A hermeneutics that accepts this first premise of proprietorship via alienation is already well advanced along the path of the faithful lover: the philologist as sensitive reader has every reason to accept this and more from the text. Recognizing Catullus the friend, lover, and poet, we give him back to himself as such and complete the circuit described by the text: he finds himself in our reading of him. Catullus produces a self-(re)presentation in the dispossession of his text.²⁹ This open letter or postcard that has pointedly missed its addressee asks of the one who happens to have received it that he return to the sender himself; it asks that Catullus be returned to himself. The path of self-production as oneself thus advances via the detour of the other.³⁰

The waxen tablets and the physical codex of the *libellus* make use of the word to play this game of presence and absence, of *fort/da*.³¹ Poem 50 reiterates a structure that has been with us since the opening poem, where Catullus signs the whole of his text by asking to whom it should be given.³² But it makes a return to a still earlier scene of exchange. To impose momentarily a logical scheme that will prove to have little ultimate value—for sequence is precisely what will be lost in the end—poem 1, written last but coming first, repeats a scene from poem 50, and this first poem rehearses a primal scene of poetic giving. But the first gift is not ever first. It is always a return: *reddens mutua*. *Mutua* points to the play of yours and mine,³³ and in *reddens* the tablets and their words are always going back, never moving for the first time.³⁴ So also the whole of the Catullan corpus: it advances by way of retreat-cum-alienation.

²⁹Compare Lacan 1977c: 41–42.

³⁰The play is upon Freud's *Weg* and *Umweg* in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as it is reread by Derrida. See, for example, Derrida 308–22. Hubbard 1984: 40 notes a conjunction between reader and author accompanied by the theme of separation in poem 68.

³¹Compare Lacan 1977c: 67.

³²*Pace* Hubbard 1983, Bardon 1970: 75–76 offers a reading that complements my own: "La pièce qui ouvre le *libellus* est un appel au lecteur; elle commence par une interrogation: *cui dono...?* Quiconque lit Catulle se sent concerné, simplement qu'il ne cesse de s'adresser à *tu*, c'est-à-dire à nous."

³³Compare poem 45.20 for the erotics of reciprocity.

³⁴Friedrich 233 notes as well that *reddere* can also mean "to read aloud": "*Reddere* ist 'mitteilen,' hier also 'vorlesen.'" See also the parallel citation adduced by Friedrich. Hence the return gift is also confused with returning words verbally as well as passing them in written form as the lived and spoken becomes written and the written becomes lived in speech.

The last poem comes first in the text, and it is the first to go. All of the others slip away in their turn. They come to us as they slip away from Catullus.

In poem 50 there is a final return that sets the proprietary seal of both a limit point and a point of origin upon this self-alienating text. Catullus warns Calvus lest Nemesis take vengeance upon him, *poenas reposcat*. The punishment is not so much exacted, though, as it is sought back as something due to Nemesis, something Calvus owes and ought to return. Outraged *numen* frequently demands that a mortal pay a debt with his life, and here too death seems the most fitting coin. Nemesis ought to seek back from Calvus the half-death he owes Catullus and his half-dead limbs (*semimortua membra*). On his death-bed, which was also the bed of his love and his desire, Catullus sought the return of the light and the return of Calvus as light/life. Being, seeing, and speaking merge in this fantasy of a return from death to life. The return of Calvus is here always also a return of words and the exchange of words; it is a return to the first tablets and their alienation. So also is Nemesis the appropriate deity to invoke: through her name Catullus invokes not so much a semi-death that would be paid for with a death, but a punishment that would again restore Catullus to himself. Nemesis divides, allots, and apports: she redeploys the play of mine and thine that is lost with the departure of Calvus. Once these terms are back, the tablets can start moving again, and Catullus will be reanimated in the moment of literary exchange.

Let us return to the love- and death-bed for a moment. The representation of the moment of half-death was decidedly literary, a moment written and bearing the marks of writing. Catullus writes himself out of the moment of this death by going back to it and revisiting it in poem 50. Another return, then. This moment of non-being looks out to time shared with Calvus as being and presence; but this moment is also a thing apprehended, and apprehended for the purpose of exchange. Catullus will use the power of the gift of the word by way of a literary return. Here “life protects itself by repetition, trace, and *différance* (deferral).”³⁵ The point of non-being acts as the empty point of origin from which emerges both the vision *qua* vision of a return of Calvus and a return to exchanges with Calvus. And, as with all returns in Catullus’ world, it is not a return to a first moment, but a return to a prior moment in an already constituted network of exchange, a return to mutual returns and the psychic profit thereby derived.³⁶ The moment of non-being also serves as the point of origin for the text as we have it, the text that returns us to the first exchange even if Calvus

³⁵See Derrida 203.

³⁶One can compare the system of profit and loss in Pliny below.

never comes back in person. The word, following the pure negativity of Saussurian linguistics, makes a presence of absence.³⁷ It plays *fort/da* with this negativity and from it allows the self-constitution of the ego via the mediation of literary exchange. The author must send out love-letters, for without love he is lost to himself and to the world. Catullus always says in the same breath, “Let us live and let us love,”³⁸ while adding, *sotto voce*, “And let us write of it.”

The literary corpus of Catullus obeys the punning logic of σῶμα/σῆμα, where the body is bound to the sign/tomb.³⁹ First, the text points to the body and person of its author in a semiotics of identity: “I am my signs; this poem is me, Catullus.” At the same time, the body is also nothing without the sign; and the sign lives only as part of a universe of signs that are passed from hand to hand. Thus the action of the forms of “to be” in the examples above was transitive. Furthermore, the question of being should also be rewritten from the other direction: “my signs are me; I am my poem.” Catullus’ poem vouches for Catullus, and Catullus for the poem.⁴⁰

The literary corpus is also a tombstone: it marks the loss of its own author as it speaks for him.⁴¹ Poem 50 is obsessed with the notion that the departure of the author, whether it is the departure of Calvus or of Catullus, is a prerequisite for a text that invites a return to/of presence: “I am because I sent off signs of myself; I am that which my poem promises me to be.”⁴² This poem was always

³⁷See Lacan 1977c: 65. His remarks recall passages like Saussure 155ff, though Lacan’s explicit allusions in this essay go back only as far as Lévi-Strauss along the path of structuralist thought. See Lacan 1977b for direct references to Saussure and the “differential” quality of linguistic signification as opposed to positivist reification.

³⁸Most famously and explicitly at 5.1. This poem slides into an accountancy of kisses that might well be kept in mind below when Pliny does some bookkeeping of his own.

³⁹See Pl. *Grg.* 493a and the citation of E. fr. 638: “Who knows if life is not death, and death life?” (τίς δ’ οἶδεν, εἰ τὸ ζῆν μὲν ἔστι καταθανεῖν, / τὸ καταθανεῖν δὲ ζῆν;). Compare Wohl 158, which analyzes Euripides’ *Alcestis* as a dead sign enabling the paternal symbolic of the play that bears her name.

⁴⁰And this from the same poet who ironically advises us in poem 16 that the poet is not his words: “I declare that I’ll rape you if you think I mean anything when I talk about sex.” Last line equaling the first, we can start reading again from the top and find ourselves indefinitely having/not having a sexual experience in literary form. Even when the words are signaled as mere words, they still come to accrue real substance. Or at least Catullus expects the word to have become real when one sends back a reply to the poem by saying, “Why, I blushed to hear what you said about raping me after I naively told you about how I got turned on by those other poems.”

⁴¹Here one can compare the “talking tombstone” trope in antiquity where the marker speaks to the passer-by.

⁴²Notice that the “I” in these imagined sentences can and should be thought of as spoken by Catullus the author of this poem, and as the implied statements of both Catullus and Calvus as authors on my/your tablets in the scene within the poem.

constituted as such a marker of loss, though, even as the living Catullus wrote it. It was destined to depart from him in a gesture that buys identity via alienation. The poem departs in a gesture that secures authorial self-presence through the emptiness of the word standing in as a guarantor for its own author.⁴³

Thus Catullus emerges as ever and only the poet, lover and man of letters.⁴⁴ This stance is in many senses predictable in one who has refused *negotium* for *otium*, trading occupation for idleness. I am thinking, of course, of the fourth stanza of the next poem, 51, his translation of a love poem by Sappho.⁴⁵ The notorious problem of the unity of 51 has attracted a good deal of attention, and I have no desire to rehearse the results of those efforts. Fredricksmeyer's work usefully cuts through the dogmatic assertions of his predecessors and assures us that the interpretive problem with poem 51 is precisely that, interpretive, and not philological or textual-critical. Does the fourth stanza work as an element of this poem? Opinions and prejudices about poet, poem, and project arise to answer the challenge. Fredricksmeyer's conclusion, though—that Catullus' *otium* is burdensome here because it is not the *otium* of Lesbia's satisfied lover sitting opposite—seems congenial to my own reading of poem 50. The themes of literary self-awareness (that is, translating Sappho makes 51 into another meta-poem where "sincerity" and literary artifice converge), presence, and distance are all at work here as well. As in poem 50, these issues come to structure the psychic landscape and the self-possession of the poet who deploys them. For Catullus, *otium*, the time of writing and the time of poetry, is opposed to *negotium*, the time of doing. *Otium* produces verses that announce the destruction of their (sovereign) author even as they constitute him as himself.⁴⁶

⁴³I am reminded by one of *TAPA*'s anonymous readers that both Martial and Ovid offer rich material for the further exploration of this theme: "Go, my books." See, for example, Mart. 10.104 and Ov. *Tr.* 2.1. Ovid's poems of exile as a whole can be read as *libelli* sent back to Rome revisiting, among other things, the problem of the *libelli* that constituted the *error* for which Ovid himself is now separated from Rome: *Weg* and *Umweg* indeed.

⁴⁴Bardon 1970: 137 also argues for poetic self-constitution as against the simple construction of a poetic façade in Catullus: "[L]e travail d'art finit par façonner l'être qui n'y voit pas un jeu, mais qui le charge d'exprimer une vie. L'artisan du vers devient l'artisan de lui-même."

⁴⁵"Ease, Catullus, is too much for you: / ease makes you run riot, you go wild; / ease has been the ruin of kings before, the end of wealthy cities." (*otium, Catulle, tibi molestum est: / otio exsultas nimiumque gestis: / otium et reges prius et beatas / perdidit urbes.*).

⁴⁶The applications of *otium* in both poem 51 and poem 50 are discussed in Janan 51–55. From a slightly earlier period in the scholarly literature, Clack also offers a bibliographic summary of commentary on the relationship between poems 50 and 51. Janan's reading of 50 and 51 focuses on the advent of a quasi-ecstatic *jouissance*, whereas in the scene of 50 I am arguing for a relatively normative, though not uncomplicated, economy of writing on and of

While generally lacking Catullus' poetic flair, Pliny too reads as a man of letters.⁴⁷ And while one might object to the preceding account on the grounds that too little heed was paid to Catullus as persona, Pliny's condition reveals that the man of letters, whatever his genre, lives in and through the mask he composes in the mirror of the other to whom he writes. Recently scholarship on Pliny has become interested in his self-fashioning, particularly his self-fashioning after the manner described by Greenblatt.⁴⁸ Though it has the advantage of taking seriously the literary qualities of social life, Greenblatt's approach can at times postulate a conscious agency somehow anterior to and in control of the self it produces. When this self is seen as constrained by and engaged with a society in which it resides, the analysis becomes more rigorous but can still leave open the problem of a reified *socius*. It is to be hoped that a more complex account of the interaction between self and society may be provided through my focus on the letter and the letter's desire as the vehicle of self-constitution in the intersubjective moment.⁴⁹

One can only fashion one's own appearance by way of appeal to a self-image through the mirror of the other: the world of meaning meets up with the formation of the self in the elaborate and urbane ritual of identification and signification that the encounter with a peer produces and obsessively reproduces; and this ritual is itself performed for us by way of a compulsive repetition of missives. The social drama of these encounters between men provokes an epistolary rearticulation of the structure by which the ego is inserted into the world of language. Thus I see in all of these letters a necessary passage negotiating the intersection of the imaginary and the symbolic as described by Lacan. In Lacanian terms this is the movement between the ego (*moi*) and the symbolic order that makes possible the notion of the "I" (*je*) of

desire. In terms of the Lacanian idiom we share, Janan is interested in the *jouissance* of the later seminars, where feminine sexuality as an intractable problem for the masculine order comes to the fore. On the other hand, I am reading for the homosocial and homosexual components of the regulation of the normative male ego in a moment where the symbol and the image converge.

⁴⁷Pliny has attracted few admirers, and he is more often mined for the sociological truths his correspondence reveals than taken seriously as a first-rate author. Before defending Pliny's efforts as a stylist, Jal offers a summary of Pliny's receptions. The question of whether or not these letters represent "real" correspondence seems to have as little pertinence here as it does in the case of Catullus: in both authors these epistles are representatives of a process of the production of the self by means of the open letter or even the misdelivered letter. The "proper" trajectory of the letter is the preoccupation of the whole of Derrida's *The Post Card*.

⁴⁸Here one can consult Leach, Riggsby 1995 and Riggsby (forthcoming).

⁴⁹One can compare Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power*, which is wholly dedicated to examining the theoretical problem of the internalization of power and the representation of this process in contemporary critical discourse.

speech. In effect, Lacan argues that, in grammatical terms, the *moi* is the indirect object of the *je* of language. On the other hand, the ego is the place from which the subject utters sentences of the form “I....” The Lacanian version of the Freudian discovery asserts that the ego is neither origin nor owner of its own discourse. This observation, though, is in itself incapable of providing much special insight into our love-letters. In this regard, I believe, we need to engage Derrida’s focus on the complexity of the missive within such a scheme. Why should one need writing and rewriting in order both to perform and to figure this moment of convergence? How does a letter sent out to an addressee and (mis)delivered to our eyes become the agent of social self-production and, more basically, the production of any self at all?⁵⁰

Pliny’s letters carefully overlay the process of subjectivization in the love-letter with the requirement of an elaborate diagnostic apparatus. In particular, Catullan sexual ambiguities are actively prevented from emerging. In Pliny’s exchanges, author and recipient do not merely recognize their mutual existence ‘neath the wings of Eros. A hermeneutics of moral exchange and authorized subjects applies itself to the moment of inauguration via exchange.⁵¹ Here love and the letter unite so as to produce specific kinds of lovers and letters, while other types are forcibly elided from the tablet of exchange. For Pliny, love poems and *otium* form the zone of a constitutive exclusion.⁵² Pliny is a man who is all business—and a man who manifestly fears the ruin of élite male sovereignty, and of Rome, that truly sensual love-letters might portend.

The following letter has a structure closely parallel to Catullus 50. In both its convergences and divergences, though, Pliny’s letter reveals the vital social stakes invested in the letter. The writer too emerges as himself by way of an intersubjectivity that relies on the support of the love-letter. Let us read for a while Pliny à la Catullus:

⁵⁰These additional considerations, coupled with my reading of Catullus, above, explain my relative coolness toward claims that the private man emerged into Roman life at this period, as argued by Foucault 1988 and accepted by Leach. Something more vital and less historically contingent is happening in these parallel letters from two distinct literary genres and two different Roman eras.

⁵¹The shift to such a moralizing tone is perhaps explained by Fitzgerald’s arguments. For Fitzgerald, Catullus often adopts a feminine, passive, or subordinate role as both a poet and a poet who publishes. Pliny, in producing literature at all, let alone publishing it, becomes implicated in such structures, but his social standing militates against taking on, even in play, a subordinate role such as that entertained by Catullus.

⁵²But see Fitzgerald 428–29 for Pliny reading Catullan verse and adopting a similar erotics of literature relative to his own poetry. Most significantly, Pliny states (*Ep.* 7.4.3–9) that he was led to compose hendecasyllabics [like Catullus 50] by reading of a homosexual kiss in an epigram by Cicero.

C. PLINIUS SEPTICIO CLARO SVO S.

Heus tu! promittis ad cenam, nec uenis? dicitur ius: ad assem impendium reddes, nec id modicum. (2) paratae erant lactucae singulae, cochleae ternae, oua bina, halica cum mulso et niue (nam hanc quoque computabis, immo hanc in primis quae perit in ferculo), oliuae betacei cucurbitae bulbi, alia mille non minus lauta. audisses comoedos uel lectorem uel lyristen uel (quae mea liberalitas) omnes. (3) at tu apud nescio quem ostrea uuluas echinos Gaditanas maluisti.

dabis poenas, non dico quas. dure fecisti: inuidisti, nescio an tibi, certe mihi, sed tamen et tibi. quantum nos luissemsus risissemus studuissemus! (4) potes adparatius cenare apud multos, nusquam hilarius simplicius incautius. in summa experire, et nisi postea te aliis potius excusaueris, mihi semper excusa. vale. (*Ep.* 1.15)

Pliny to Septicius Clarus

You! You say you are coming to dinner and then you don't? It's a case for the courts: you'll pay to the penny, and a pretty one at that. (2) I was offering individual lettuces, three escargots, two eggs, a porridge with honeyed wine, chilled with snow—and you will need to calculate the cost of this also, no, calculate especially the snow disappearing in the dish;—there were olives, beets, gourds, onions, and a thousand other things no less sumptuous. You would have heard comic actors, or a reader, or a lyre-player, or—and here you can see my generosity—all of them. (3) But you chose some other guy's house: oysters, sow bellies, sea-urchins, Gadian dancing-girls.

You'll suffer for this somehow. It was a cruel thing to do: you shortchanged perhaps yourself, and certainly me—no, definitely yourself as well. Oh how we would have played, laughed, studied! (4) You can find a fancier meal elsewhere, but nowhere will it be more gay, unaffected, and relaxed. In short, give me a try, and if everyone else doesn't get the cold shoulder from you after that, then you can say "No" to me for ever more.

Catullus spoke of playing in verse in playful verses. The same sportive tone holds true here as well. In this case, though, Pliny plays the jilted lover: he has been stood up while his friend enjoyed himself with another. And where Catullus and Calvus exchange (*reddere*) words and more, Clarus can only give back (*reddere*) to Pliny the sign of the sign, the doubly derivative coin (*assis*):⁵³

⁵³Compare Marx 80ff: the form of money makes gold seem to be a sign of and for a certain quantity of linen, *vel sim.*. But the linen is itself only a sign of the concrete human relations subtending its production, distribution, and value in the fullest sense of the term. Pliny would have literary culture be the coin of the realm, the universal equivalent with which social relations, including the self-relation, are calculated.

he has contracted a debt for goods exchanged but not received, for a relationship between men that both was and was not realized. Pliny has his account books open, and he expects a return on his investment. The economics of Pliny's version makes Catullus' tablets (*tabellae*) grow up out of their diminutive into full-fledged account-books (*tabulae*): give and return, or else you will merely be asked to pick up the tab; and if you don't pay promptly, the debt only grows.⁵⁴ With his letter Catullus returns yet another tablet to Calvus, while Pliny sends to Clarus in epistolary form a literary moment that never took place. But the debt owed Pliny upon reading him is just the same as if all his wares had been sampled directly: pay up or else.... And here one owes not just culture, but the recognition of culture. Pliny's readers contract the same debt Clarus does as soon as they take these words into their hands. They owe to Pliny the return of himself as himself.

While the tone is rather light-hearted, we still ought to note key features in the structure of the game. In fact, sportiveness itself returns as an important theme: playing (*ludere*) is what Pliny and Clarus would have done. Instead it is only the letter that is playful, but, in so playing, it entices Clarus to imagine the real thing. In this letter, Clarus has his cakes without eating them. At the same time, he is also asked to split the check with Pliny. The letter entangles all in a web of exchange whether they will or no and makes debtors of them on a sudden.

Had Clarus shown up, would he and Pliny have passed an evening similar to that spent by Calvus and Catullus? In many respects, the answer is clearly "yes." The evening was to be spent with not just a meal but also a variety of literary entertainments. Where Catullus and Calvus wrote, Pliny and Clarus will merely consume literature. At the same time, the aura surrounding this spectatorship is familiar and full of good cheer and playfulness: this is *ludere* again. But Pliny's play is bifurcated in an interesting modification: it is both laughter and diligent study. The pleasure of literary engagement is constrained so as to be also earnest amidst its joys.

This is all well and good, but where is Catullus' sexiness? More bluntly, is it fair to compare the earlier letter with this letter of Pliny? I would like now to turn directly to the problem of pleasure and its negotiation in Pliny. The first clue to this puzzle has already been given: *studere* is the word that replaces the amorous flames of the poet. In other words, Catullus reads and writes, his heart catches fire, and he writes another poem, while Pliny's relationship to his friend is differently mediated by letters. Pliny reads and writes, laughs, and has a good time. But his response to this is *studium*: earnestness. Catullus' *otium* turns into

⁵⁴It is not without reason that one sees fecundity in interest or *faenus*: OLD s.v. *faenus*.

poetic *negotium*, that is, poetry. Pliny's ease, though, also turns into industry: for Pliny, *otium* invites *studium*.⁵⁵

There is an erotics of sorts to this earnestness. Certainly *studium* pits itself against pleasures of a certain kind. And here we have to look more closely at the two meals in Pliny's letter. Pliny offered a simpler meal, but Clarus accepted a rather more luxurious one. From a moralist's perspective, though, the two dinners were worlds apart, one representing an austere virility, the other a wanton effeminacy. In other words, Pliny has been slighted, precisely as an earnest man, in favor of a competing pleasure.

Except for the lettuces, all of the foods mentioned in Pliny's meal turn up in Cato's *On Agriculture*: these are the foods found on the humble farm of the stern, severe, and virile Censor from the so-called good old days of Rome.⁵⁶ Regarding lettuce, Martial 3.47 locates this vegetable in an idyllic countryside and away from the temptations of the city. The only luxury, the snow, is made humorous by Pliny's insistence that Clarus take this item in particular into account, as if his aspiring host could not really afford it.⁵⁷ Moreover, the snow plays a tragicomic part, as it vanishes before it can even be consumed: "give me credit for what is already gone." The snow, then, is in itself already an example of the theme of presence/absence so vital to these love-letters. Significantly, it is also the only "odd" ingredient of Pliny's otherwise simple meal.

On the other hand, Cato's farm is not the place to look for any of the items in the rival meal. Oysters and urchins are straight out of Trimalchio's banquet. The sow's womb, the *vulva*, is a more interesting case. It ought to be a rather humble food, since in Juvenal's eleventh satire it is the fare a ditch-digger thinks of eating in a low-class diner.⁵⁸ Yet the *vulva* is perhaps not out of place: in both Juvenal and Persius the word is also used of the female genitals. On this reading, the rival meal thus acquires a prurient aspect. Food is sexualized so as to become an even broader occasion for carnal enticement. If this is true, should

⁵⁵Compare Greek σχολή, which joins ease and study into a single moment. For the imbrication of study (*studium*) and the friend's duty (*amicitiae officium*) see Plin. *Ep.* 8.9.2 and the comments of Büttler 28. Büttler examines the literary dimension of Pliny's use of *studium* at length (28–40), and immediately follows that discussion with a treatment of the problem of ease and industry (*otium* and *negotium*) in Pliny. On the connection between *studium* and *otium* see especially Büttler 44ff.

⁵⁶Examples of products also found in Cato *Agr.* include *cochlea*, 158; *alica*, 76, 79; *mulsum*, 80, 157; *beta*, 158; *cucurbita*, 7; *bulbi*, 8.

⁵⁷Sherwin-White 121 notes that honeyed wine, *mulsum*, ought to be a luxury too, though Pliny seems to think that only the snow is an extravagance. In Cato, likewise, *mulsum* does not appear to be particularly luxurious.

⁵⁸*fossor / qui meminit calidae sapiat quid volva popinae* (Juv. 11.80–81).

we not assume that there may be a sexuality lurking in Pliny's simple meal, namely the legitimate sexuality of a Cato?

Well, there is a sexuality to Pliny's letter: when Pliny accuses Clarus of cruelty (*dure fecisti*), he uses language from a lover's elegiac plaint. Moreover, a sexual competition can be noted in Pliny's use of *lauta* (2). For Cato, *lautus* will only mean "washed" as in "properly washed vegetables." But in other authors *lautus* means elegant or refined, and we must give it that translation here. Pliny is offering Cato and Cato's purity as elegance. In fact, this Catonic version of elegance is pitted against the gaudy elegance of the rival meal. Certainly *lautus* is a word we expect to find describing the very kind of fare Clarus had preferred. In Petronius' *Satyricon*, the cooks' ingenious and extravagant meal is given the appellation *lautitiae* or "elegances" (70), even though the narrator is most likely being sarcastic. In Pliny *Ep.* 9.17, *lautus* is, in fact, again used of a dinner where jesters, erotic dancers and fools are performing.⁵⁹ That meal too is contrasted with one where a comic, a reader, or a lyre-player entertains, as we might find at the house of Pliny. Pliny is asking Clarus: whose meal is more elegant, which gives the better pleasure, which is truly literary? Most importantly, Pliny would have us ask ourselves all these questions at once. Thus good taste, good pleasure and good literature become a single bundled issue.

Let's return to the rival meal again to take a closer look at Pliny's literary and sexual politics. As if the *vulvae* on the menu were not bad enough, such food is mentioned in the same context as the *Gaditanae*, the dancing-girls. In fact, the phrasing is asyndetic, juxtaposing the foods and the girls quite dramatically. Even more tightly than in the account of his own spurned offerings, Pliny here associates the meal and its entertainments. These dancing-girls, though, are not polite fare. When Gadian dancers appear in Juvenal, they are part of a highly sexualized evening's entertainment—the girls dance; the spectator gets a hard-on; and then he comes.⁶⁰ The text is rather corrupt, and one might dispute the translation of individual words, but the sort of party at which one finds these girls is not really in doubt. These women seem to be an ancient version of the lap-dancer.

One can only be thankful for the sexual reserve that has characterized Pliny's letter throughout: we are spared the Juvenalian details. At the same time, though, we are not exactly spared them. The unsaid is spoken quite clearly to those who would hear. Pliny's prose is once again enacting its own

⁵⁹*scurrae, cinaedi, moriones.*

⁶⁰See Juv. 11.162–70: despite textual corruption, the obscenity of line 170 is secure.

principles. It performs the sexual ethos in which Clarus is invited to participate: Eros is imputed, but not vulgarly brought to the foreground. The refined literary tastes we needed at Pliny's house are needed all over again when we read his letters: if we know our Latin literature and allusions, our Cato and our decadent poets, the message becomes much clearer. By participating in Pliny's literary banquet, we fully appreciate the nature of the original fare that was missed.

This notion of the literature that itself participates in the ordering principles of the life it represents is a theme we encountered in Catullus. But there is another Catullan set of ideas that will recur here: the bond between lack, desire, and letters. Pliny's addressee, Septicius Clarus, is not just anyone. Clarus is the addressee of the introductory epistle (1.1) and is presented there as the man who encouraged Pliny to collect and publish the volume we know as the *Epistulae*.⁶¹ He is thus in a sense the source of the whole epistolary project. If Clarus turns away from Pliny's table and its literature, a serious crisis ensues. Is what Pliny offers—namely, a genteel manly sexuality of the table and the pen—going to be a viable way of relating to his friend? When Clarus does not show up, Pliny writes him a letter that performs the very heart of the dinner and also the very soul of Pliny's literary project. It should come as no surprise, then, that the writer insists Clarus will never go back to a rival table, once he has tried one of Pliny's dinners. If Clarus reads this letter well, he has already sampled the dinner, and already acquiesced to the principle that construes such a dinner as superior to a lavish and erotic spectacle. Pliny needs Clarus at his house: without Clarus Pliny tosses and turns like a Catullus. And, like Catullus, Pliny writes a love-letter to his friend both to recover him and to capture him within a whole textual version of the author's world, where life, love, and literature merge.⁶²

In every sense of the term, Pliny's ego is on the line. Pliny constitutes himself by sending himself away to Clarus and awaiting the return of the love his letter performs. Pliny sends himself to Clarus. Clarus owes him, he'll have to pay to the penny. By not coming to Pliny's house, Clarus purloined from Pliny the letter and the spirit of the evening. The theft of the evening, a literate event at that, motivates the sending of another furtive letter that tries to steal presence from absence, a deed from a void, and an *as* from Clarus' pocket.

⁶¹Recall also the structural affinity mentioned above between Catullus' poems 50 and 1.

⁶²Such a conclusion would force a rereading of a statement like that of Guillemain: "Indépendamment de leur valeur comme oeuvre littéraire, les lettres de Plinie ont l'avantage de nous offrir la plus parfaite image de la société de son temps; aucune source n'est plus féconde pour nous en rélever la connaissance." (Guillemain 1). If the society Pliny reveals is also the one he writes and writes himself into, the letters' "valeur littéraire" is profoundly connected with their documentary value. See also Jal.

Much of the significance of these purloined and purloining letters lies not so much in their text as in the mobilization and mobility of texts and signs in general. The disappropriation and circulation of these texts enables the self-representation of subjects who would claim both text and self for themselves.⁶³

While letters and desire fused in a rather explicit manner for Catullus tossing on his bed, Pliny has shown a similar yoking of the two but superimposed a measure of sexual reserve. Desire is present in the meeting of men, and this desire is expressed, inculcated, and managed by literature. Here Catullus and Pliny agree. But Pliny also sees a problem in the wrong sort of desire potentially emerging from these social and literary contexts. *Studium* is the word used to negotiate the crisis. Let us, then, look more closely at *studium* and the erotics of literature by examining yet another letter of Pliny. This letter will provoke a sexual crisis and then resolve it by appeal to study. Literature is sexualized, but good literature and good literary training construct an acceptable, normative, and restrained male sexuality.⁶⁴

This letter is addressed to Corellia Hispulla, the daughter of a deceased friend of Pliny:⁶⁵

C. PLINIVS CORELLIAE HISPVLLAE SVAE

Cum patrem tuum grauissimum et sanctissimum uirum suspexerim magis an amauerim dubitem, teque et in memoriam eius et in honorem tuum unice diligam, cupiam necesse est atque etiam quantum in me fuerit enitar, ut filius tuus auo similis exsistat; equidem malo materno, quamquam illi paternus etiam clarus spectatusque contigerit, pater quoque et patruus inlustri laude conspicui. (2) quibus omnibus ita demum similis adolescet, si imbutus honestis artibus fuerit, quas plurimum refert a quo potissimum accipiat.

(3) adhuc illum pueritiae ratio intra contubernium tuum tenuit, praeceptores domi habuit, ubi est erroribus modica uel etiam nulla materia. iam studia eius extra limen proferenda sunt, iam circumspiciendus rhetor Latinus, cuius scholae seueritas pudor in primis castitas constet. (4) adest enim adulescenti nostro cum ceteris

⁶³On the purloined letter, see Lacan 1972 and Lacan 1988b: 191–206. Compare Derrida's critique in Derrida 413–96. Derrida would perhaps accuse my reading of following Lacan's and "[determining] the text as a veil within the space of truth, [reducing] the text to a movement of *aletheia*" (Derrida 418). I would prefer to see this interpretation as demonstrating the would-be truth of a certain kind of textual movement that seeks to ground the stability of the self.

⁶⁴See Jal 218 on the moral character of the epistolary corpus: "Y règnent la plupart du temps les exigences du bon ton, du πρέπον, de la convenance, de l'*honestas*, quelque chose de chaste, et même de guindé et de compassé."

⁶⁵For his suicide to escape a lasting and painful illness see *Ep.* 1.12.

naturae fortunaeque dotibus eximia corporis pulchritudo, cui in hoc lubrico aetatis non praeceptor modo sed custos etiam rectorque quaerendus est.

(5) videor ergo demonstrare tibi posse Iulium Genitorem. amatur a me; iudicio tamen meo non obstat caritas hominis, quae ex iudicio nata est. vir est emendatus et grauis, paulo etiam horridior et durior, ut in hac licentia temporum. (6) quantum eloquentia ualeat, pluribus credere potes, nam dicendi facultas aperta et exposita statim cernitur; uita hominum altos recessus magnasque latebras habet, cuius pro Genitore me sponsorem accipe. nihil ex hoc uiro filius tuus audiet nisi profuturum, nihil discet quod nescisse rectius fuerit, nec minus saepe ab illo quam a te meque admonebitur, quibus imaginibus oneretur, quae nomina et quanta sustineat.

(7) proinde fauentibus dis trade eum praeceptor, a quo mores primum mox eloquentiam discat, quae male sine moribus discitur. vale. (*Ep.* 3.3)

Pliny to Corellia Hispulla

I don't know whether I respected or loved your father more. And I have a unique affection for you out of memory to him and honor for yourself. Accordingly I must desire and labor to my utmost that your son turn out like his grandfather. I would prefer the maternal grandfather, but his paternal grandfather was a senator, and his father and his father's brother were knights. (2) He will truly grow to be the match for all of these men if he acquires a fine education. And whom he learns the most from is a matter of particular importance.

(3) Hitherto he has kept a child's regimen in your house; he has teachers at home; and here there is little or no material for peccadilloes. Now, though, it is time to take his studies abroad, to look for a Latin rhetoric teacher whose school has a solid reputation for its severity, modesty, and, in particular, its chastity. (4) For our young lad has, in addition to other gifts of nature and fortune, an exceptional physical beauty. And for this in our treacherous age we must seek out not just a teacher, but a guardian and a corrector as well.

(5) So I think I can point you in the direction of Julius Genitor. I love the man; but my partisanship doesn't interfere with my judgment: in fact my opinion of him produced the sentiment. He is a stern and faultless man, even a bit too rough and hard for this licentious age. (6) The extent of his eloquence is easy to divine: speaking ability is seen at once. Men's lives, though, have hidden recesses. But take me as Genitor's sponsor in this regard. Your son will hear nothing from him except what will benefit him; he will learn nothing that it were better not to know. Nor will he be advised less often by Genitor than by you and me of the weight of his ancestors, of the names and the dignity which he upholds.

(7) And so, good luck sending the boy to a teacher from whom he will first learn character, and then eloquence: without the former, the latter is worthless.

This young man's literary education is about to enter a new phase. But his literary odyssey begins in tandem with the inception of his own sexuality and the regulation of this nascent eroticism. The boy is beautiful: he might get into trouble. In fact, one assumes that unregulated beauties naturally go astray. Hence the translation "peccadilloes" for *erroribus*: the rendering is rather willful to the extent that an *error* can be just that, an error, a misstep, or a transgression. One might then think of school-boy mistakes in the lad's first and inconsequential assignments. But Pliny's following sentences all point to a different sort of mistake.⁶⁶

It is not as if this were only a question of a fair young lad blessed with a precocious beauty. Notice that rhetorical education itself is sexy and sexualized. Pliny needs to vouch for Genitor: in the license of the age—the phrase is repeated twice—there are some speakers whose private lives are not impeccable.⁶⁷ In fact, a student does not, apparently, learn only speaking lessons from his instructors; sometimes he learns things a proper young lad ought not to know.⁶⁸

The most important thing to look for in a school, then, is chastity. At first it seems as though severity will be our goal. Here we might think of Cato again: a good young aristocrat on his way to emulating the ancients (*mos maiorum*) and his own ancestral family-portraits (*imagines*) needs a traditional and stern educator. But severity (*severitas*) at once falls into modesty (*pudor*).⁶⁹ Often *pudor* itself means chastity, but Pliny will take no chances: he makes sure that it

⁶⁶Compare *OLD* s.v. *error* #6. Time and again we will be driven deeper into the lexical entries by Pliny's thought than a casual reading of his words might otherwise take us.

⁶⁷Shelton notes the ways in which Pliny praises himself when discussing others. We can note that here too Pliny guarantees his own literary virtue and morality by writing of Genitor's. One should compare *Ep.* 9.17, though, where Pliny teaches Genitor how to consume properly a dinner party like the one found to have attracted Clarus in *Ep.* 1.15. Pliny's savoir-faire and judicious sexual tastes always trump the literal-minded chastity of a Genitor. See Leach 34–35 for Pliny's public defenses of his not always severe private tastes. Her observations should perhaps be tempered by Krasser's defense of the manuscripts' "Socratic" (*Socraticos*) against the emendation *Sotadicos*. This emendation was meant to ensure that in the passage from *Ep.* 5.3 Pliny is reading lusty verses. Leach argues from *Sotadicos*; Krasser, though, recovers the theme of the pleasure of the philosophical text within Pliny.

⁶⁸Sherwin-White 212–13 gathers other references from Pliny and contemporary authors to the potential immorality a child might be exposed to at school.

⁶⁹Kaster's preferred translation for most uses of *pudor* is "sense of shame." His own exploration of the interiority of *pudor* dovetails with my emphasis on the Plinian literary project and its relationship to the production of a carefully regulated ego.

is explicitly chastity (*castitas*) that we look for. In Pliny, a Cato's severity consists of his sexual ethics. This is our earlier letter again: there one ate like a Cato and savored polite literature. Otherwise dinner would be a bawdy orgy. Here one learns from a Cato, or else the schoolhouse becomes a den of vice.

There is an Eros that subsists amidst this polite literature as well. Pliny loves Genitor: *amatur a me*. Of course this *amo* is not the erotic *amo* of Catullus 5.1, 45, or especially 10.1, but notice how we understand this. We say that it cannot be, that Catullus slept with Lesbia and Pliny didn't sleep with Genitor: *amatur a me* means, then, *amicus est meus*. In order to translate this second, even simpler, Latin sentence, one should look up *amicus* in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, read the first entry, and stop before the second: he's my friend, not my boy-friend. Or, similarly, the "if I didn't love you" (*ni te...amarem*) addressed by Catullus to Calvus in 14.1 is, by the same chaste logic, just as amicable as is Pliny's *amatur*. Yet such celibate Catullan amity should nevertheless be reminded of the sensuality of poem 50 before being dismissed with a handshake instead of a kiss. Well, Latin allows for a great deal of confusion if one wants to be thick-headed about how to translate *amare*, and I am advocating the advantages of indulging momentarily in a befuddlement that I suspect was never felt in Rome. But how did one know how not to make such a mistake? How did one "automatically" know where not to look in the dictionary? Let us imagine a continuum that spans the two uses of *amare* rather than positing discrete lexical entries.⁷⁰ There is a desire that can be carnal, but it can just as well be social. In fact, often it will be both. And one of the functions of these letters we have been reading is to situate desire along this axis, to negotiate the modulations of pleasures: which are more carnal, which more respectable? That is, these letters teach us how to read their own contents; they offer lessons in proper translation for both their immediate addressees and for a broader audience of philologists. These are letters that teach us how not to make a juvenile *error* in our fledgling Latin studies. Pliny's love-letter thus already installs a Genitor to see to it that our reading lessons are virtuous affairs.

In so framing the discourse, these letters inevitably pit the flesh against society while also linking the two insolubly together.⁷¹ Men's mutual relations are permanently made into a question of pleasure: one asks, "What is the nature of my pleasure? How do I feel for these other men? Is what I feel proper?"⁷²

⁷⁰Compare Sedgwick 1–2.

⁷¹More broadly, Leach notes Pliny's concern for the identity of public performer and private personality.

⁷²Foucault has detailed the process of self-subjection to regimes demanding a truth of pleasures. See Foucault 1990 and 1988.

Letters pass between men as the agents of this desire, assigned the conjoint task of both inciting and regulating these pleasures.

The letter gives a name to the moment of social exchange towards which it looks. This writing inscribes with a name a gesture that is no longer ineffable or lost in the immediacy of the moment.⁷³ The letter divides the immanence of practice, forcing upon it the moment of theoretical inspection. This is not a moment of neutral viewing, though. The letter's intervention imposes analysis as a necessary moral counterpart in the exchange. Pliny demands that the social cathexis that draws men together and leads them to share the table and the tablet speak the name of love as literary amity in order to circumvent the utterance of a love that must not speak its name: love cannot be for the vulva or for the anus. This inscription erases these organs as it writes. Let there be no *error* when one writes of *amare*.

The letter exposes only to re-inter the homosexual affective component of everyday life. In its turn, it acts as an accomplice in the normative and normalizing labor of the production of homosexual affect as amity. At the same time, the letter puts under erasure the name of a love spelled in the same characters, a love still spelled *amor* but whose tendencies incline towards the carnal. The loss of libido as sexual desire provides a constitutive moment in the founding of the reign of genteel friendship. It is the letter and its movement that post the message for all to read and also man the post that would keep out sensualism.⁷⁴

Pliny loves Genitor because of his high opinion of the teacher. He loves him for being faultless, stern, and hard. He loves him for being chaste in a wanton age. Pliny also loved Corellia's father. He loved that man because he respected him. He loves the family and the family honor. Note, though, that the whole of this letter makes pleasure into a literary problem. When one goes to school, what does one learn? Pliny insists that one learns love one way or the other, but he has constructed his argument in such a way that all forms of legitimate *amare* fall out on the side of stern literature, tradition, and the family. Much as the earlier letter of Pliny performed its own sexual ethics of the table and literary consumption, so does this letter here both introduce love and enact

⁷³For an anthropological account of such engaged practice, see Bourdieu, especially 49–51 and the subsequent discussion of the interaction of *habitus* and fields. Compare the related remarks on Bourdieu's method in Bourdieu and Wacquant 19ff.

⁷⁴Freud's description of the mechanism of paranoia examines the complex dynamics of this situation whereby homosexual libido is transformed into generic goodwill towards mankind. See Freud 1963 [1911]. See also Butler 132–50 on the foreclosure of homosexual affect as the precondition for normative heterosexuality. While this loss is unacknowledged and ungrieved, it does not fail to leave traces of the sort scratched on the waxen tablets of Catullus and Pliny.

its legitimate resolution. The sexuality of the central passage (3.3.3–4) is the scene of the resolution. The chastity of the figuration of unchaste carnality in this description performs in anticipation the overcoming of an unspeakable sexuality of literature where the teacher gives you letters as you give him your body. *Amatur a magistro*, “the boy is loved by his teacher,” never appears to sully Pliny’s pages in this erotic sense. Instead we shortly see the teacher himself loved, or rather esteemed by Pliny: *amatur a me*. One is forced to translate this second *amatur*, the one which actually appears in Pliny’s text, as if it were a derivative of a word like *diligere*, “to esteem.”⁷⁵ Pliny performs this substitution and translation of *amatur*, though, only after love and literature have come into crisis. And Pliny’s usage lies like a sign or tombstone, a σῆμα, marking a frontier beyond which a good man is lost. This word also marks as nevertheless erotic the terrain lying on the near side of these principles of pleasure.

Catullus reads, writes, and loves all at once and together. Pliny does the same. For Catullus, his mind and body feel the restless flames of desire. But when Pliny falls in love, a whole senatorial aristocracy emerges on the scene: Pliny says “I love the ancestors; and I love stern learning.” The boy’s beautiful body will be educated by this severity into reproducing a patrimony in which Pliny has invested his own desire.

Studium, a word combining industry and study, regulates this elaborate apparatus in Pliny. For Catullus, letters and desire reproduce one another: desire leads to letters, letters incite desire. Pliny engages in the same dialectic but interposes labor. Notice that there is even an interplay between the two in this letter, contained in the construction *cupiam necesse est atque...enitar*: “I must desire and labor.” With labor we get the gravity of Genitor and the sanctity of the family. Pliny writes to Corellia to forestall a potential crisis of patrimony. Her father has died and her son’s future is in doubt. Corellia, virtuous as she may be, stands as an interruption in the line of male models and heirs. Pliny’s letter desires and labors to reconstitute the paternal authority of Corellia’s male kin in general and of her father in particular by instructing her in the finer points of the masculine literary project. In order to guarantee proper succession, she must step aside and allow the fortuitously named Genitor to take her place as a surrogate (grand)father.⁷⁶

⁷⁵Compare *Ep.* 6.8.2 where *flagrantissimus amor* has to be translated as “a profound friendship” despite a collocation that would unambiguously refer to keen erotic excitement in another context. See also the remarks of Büttler 95.

⁷⁶One is reminded of Derrida and the puns on *pp* as *pépé* (grand-dad), primary process, pleasure principle and postal principal.

When Genitor has taken on the youth's education, the proper vigor and severity will be applied. Genitor's severity (*severitas*) will allow the boy to learn character (*mores*) and thereby to return to ancient precedent (*mos maiorum*) and the gravity (*gravitas*) and sanctity (*sanctitas*) of his lost grandfather. Without Genitor the boy is threatened with a passive (feminine) relationship to desire as he becomes the object of the sexual predations of older, literate males. Pliny likewise insists that eloquence without a moral component is a sign of a decadent erotics of literature. Literary exchange and interchange has an innate sexuality that must be tamed by recourse to paternal authority. With virile and paternal literary training, the boy will reproduce the proper constellation of verbal notions as desire and labor, desiring labor, and laboring desire cluster around manly letters, of which we presently read an example.

Literature and learning are a project. The product of this project is the whole social apparatus of the aristocratic class to which Pliny belongs. Accordingly one labors in and for severity and gravity. One labors to be a leading member of society. One must desire and labor to take one's place among aristocratic ancestors and peers. This is the literary project: labor and mastery, a *negotium* that suffuses the scene of *otium*. Catullus desires Calvus, his peer. But Pliny's desire extends out into the whole chaste community of literate aristocrats. The love-letter in both cases is the agent of this desire as it simultaneously reveals and commands these loves.

With both Catullus and Pliny we find the sublimation of desire in literature. Looking at these letters in their totality, we perceive that the first and second person singular of *amare* create a sphere of great anxiety where both "I" and "you" are negotiated: *amo/amas*. "I say something about your love, about my love, about you, about myself." For Catullus writing itself both occasions and deflects excitement. Pliny, for his part, translates *amare* in such a way that its object becomes the community of earnest, literate men providing the symbolic backdrop that gives meaning to the literary exchange.⁷⁷ In both cases the ego establishes itself by sending a letter to you and getting it back for itself. "We are in love" is written into the moment of the missive: the intersubjective quality of this exchange establishes "you" and "I" by way of appeal to the mutual receipt of both love and the letter. For both authors the domain of language intersects with this coupled pair, this "I" and this "you," through the letter that plays with presence and absence.⁷⁸ Our authors have sent us several letters,

⁷⁷Cf. Lacan 1988b: 309–26, especially 321, on the psychoanalytic force of *A,m,a,S*.

⁷⁸In Lacanian terms, *moi* and *autre* form the heart of the word *AmaS* and serve as the medial elements in this Symbolic play.

but a single word is written as the address of each: *amas*, “you are in love.” Or, punctuated differently, we read, “you are, in love.”⁷⁹ This is the word Pliny and Catullus are always writing on every page, a word they must write and send off to us in order to find themselves. To love is to write; and, more importantly for us as students of literature, to write is to love. Let us not love blindly when we write back our philological replies.

⁷⁹See Lacan 1977c: 98–99 and 106 for punctuation and scansion as the analyst’s work.

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