

## HAPPIER TRANSPORTS TO BE: CATULLUS' POEM 4: *PHASELUS ILLE*\*

Maeve O'Brien

NUI Maynooth

The *poeta doctus* Catullus is, on the face of it, omnipresent in his poetry, often by name.<sup>1</sup> The reader imagines she knows Catullus, but who does she know? In the end, *miser* or *pessimus poeta*, all that remains of Catullus is his poetry. Few figures in the ancient world are as perplexing. His poems require an effort of interpretation from the reader their brevity belies. For instance, Catullus' Poem 4 is always a source of puzzlement – to me anyway. Is it autobiographical? Is the yacht real? How significant is the epic voyage it describes? The answers might be: Does it matter? You cannot be serious. Significant. Poem 4 is the focus of my remarks here.<sup>2</sup> However, the poems of the first eleven not associated with Lesbia, that is, Poems 4, 6, 9, and 10 will make an appearance. To the best of my knowledge these poems have not been treated of together with one another and separate from the other poems about Lesbia in the first eleven.<sup>3</sup>

---

\* This paper is a written version of a talk delivered at the conference, 'Myth and Image: Eastern Influences on Augustan Rome', held at the University of Wales at Aberystwyth, on 8-10 July 2004. I thank the learned audience there for their comments.

<sup>1</sup> For example, Poems 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 38, 49, 51, 52, 58, 72, 76, 79, and 82.

<sup>2</sup> The commentaries I have used are: D.F.S. Thomson, *Catullus: Edited with a Textual and Interpretative Commentary* (Toronto, 1997); C.J. Fordyce, *Catullus* (Oxford, 1961); K. Quinn, *Catullus: The Poems* (London, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> M.B. Skinner, *Catullus' Passer: The Arrangement of the Book of*

My method here is to try to seek out patterns in the narrative sequence on the basis of what is the same and what is different between each poem in terms of the image of Bithynia found in Poem 4 and in Poem 10 especially. This is not an easy task since the poems suggest and at the same time refuse patterns, or in Janan's words they cohere and dissolve consistently as we look at them.<sup>4</sup> The East, specifically the area around Troy, that recently appropriated area of Bithynia-Pontus, is an important image because through it Catullus puts a spin on his service as a poet to the republic. His poetry is a service to the state. In comparison to poets such as Virgil, Catullus' service to the state has been dismissed mostly because he himself has invited this reaction. Following Kallimachos, he treads the narrow pathway littered with exquisite poems not the broad highway of Epic. But for a Roman poet and indeed for poets always and everywhere, poetry has to address an audience, has to be involved in public life and has to be heard or read. Is Catullus, an insider, a member of the Roman elite, using his poetry complete with references to the East to comment on his own place and function as a poet in the political situation of the first century BC? The sense of a new national Roman identity cultivated by Augustus cannot spring fully formed into existence. Catullus contributes to the invention of that new national identity Augustus would promote so adroitly.

The rise of individualism in the first century BC meant that from generals to poets, people sought to enhance their own power.<sup>5</sup> When generals were poets, might not poets have seen

---

*Polymetric Poems* (New York, 1981), 48-49; C.P. Segal, 'The Order of Catullus' Poems 2-11', *Latomus* 27 (1968), 305-32.

<sup>4</sup> M. Janan, 'When the Lamp is Shattered': *Desire and Narrative in Catullus* (Carbondale, 1994), 143.

<sup>5</sup> On the growth of 'experts' in opposition to the *nobiles*, and new 'ways of knowing' along with social and political change at this time, see C. Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome*

themselves as generals? Caesar's poem now lost, *Iter*, was composed on his way from Rome to Spain in 46BC; and if we are to believe Plutarch, Caesar also composed a poem praising Hercules and a tragedy *Oedipus*, and Pliny claims for Caesar proficiency as a love poet.<sup>6</sup> Catullus does comment on his poetic function in his poems as Konstan, or Cairns, or Fitzgerald point out.<sup>7</sup> He does so in these poems by using geography: by using the image of Bithynia (a place where he spent a period on military service), in order to establish that his poetic power ranges to the ends of a growing empire. Nappa recently makes the point that all poetry in the republic while still primarily poetry can also be seen as a type of social commentary performing the function of our popular media.<sup>8</sup> For Catullus poetry is politics - and the image of Bithynia is important in this context.

New and exciting approaches to reading Catullus compete with one another: from reading the poems as performance, an approach adopted by Fitzgerald, to the feminist readings of

(Cambridge, 1993), 6 and 12.

<sup>6</sup> Suetonius, *Iul.* 56; Plutarch, *Caes.* 2; Pliny, *Ep.* 5.3.5; Cicero, *Brutus* 261. See C.S. Kraus, 'Forging a National Identity: Prose Literature down to the Time of Augustus' in O. Taplin (ed.), *Literature in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A New Perspective* (Oxford, 2000), 311-35, esp. 332; *ibid.* L. Morgan, 'Escapes from Orthodoxy: Poetry of the Late Republic', 336-58, esp. 338.

<sup>7</sup> D. Konstan, 'Self, Sex, and Empire in Catullus: the Construction of a Decentered Identity', at [www.stoa.org/diotima](http://www.stoa.org/diotima) under 'Catullus' February 2000, 3; also by the same author, *Catullus' Indictment of Rome: The Meaning of Catullus 64* (Amsterdam, 1997); W. Fitzgerald, *Catullan Provocations: Lyric Poetry and the Drama of Position* (Berkeley, 1995), 178; T. Habinek, *The Politics of Latin Literature* (Princeton, 1998), 111-112; F. Cairns, 'Venusta Sirmio Catullus 31' in A.J. Woodman & D. West (eds.), *Quality and Pleasure in Latin Poetry* (Cambridge, 1974), 1-17, at 2.

<sup>8</sup> C. Nappa, *Aspects of Catullus' Social Fiction* (Frankfurt, 2001), 151.

Skinner, or the historicist approach of Konstan. The politics of reading and interpreting poetry today is a political game with many competing parties. I do believe in common with others, that as Classics scholars we are active readers.<sup>9</sup> We create using our acquired skills and innate abilities. We do not go to the extreme of reader-response criticism where every individual reading has validity, but every reading is strengthened and developed by others. In this context, I owe much in the following discussion to the readings of the scholars just mentioned.

Pontus looms large in Poem 4 and in Poem 10, the *phaselus* and the 'litter' poems respectively. Both are about service in the area of Bithynia-Pontus. The boat is born there we are told in Poem 4, and the eight litter bearers, who carry the litter in Poem 10, are a speciality of the place. The boat is dedicated to the Dioscuri, the protectors of sailors, and the litter is associated with gods too since it is destined for the temple of Serapis. Poems 9 and 6 in contrast do not mention the East. Veranius has returned from Spain to Rome, Flavius has not gone anywhere – he just buys foreign goods, Syrian perfumes. In addition, the pairings of Poems 4 and 6 and of Poems 9 and 10 form two sets of 44 and 45 lines of poetry respectively arranged between the more famous Lesbia poems (Poems 2, and 3, 5 and 7, 8, and 11).<sup>10</sup> *Phaselus ille* the first poem is fascinating, Newman calls it puzzling, both because of its place in the *libellus* and because of its content.<sup>11</sup> Poem

---

<sup>9</sup> E.g. N. Slater, *Reading Petronius* (Baltimore, 1990), 14-15; T. Woodman & J. Powell (eds.), *Author and Audience in Latin Literature* (Cambridge, 1992), Epilogue.

<sup>10</sup> On the arrangement of the *libellus*, see e.g. C.P. Goold, *Catullus* (London, 1983), 258; C.P. Segal, 'The Order of Catullus' Poems 2-11', *Latomus* 27 (1968), 305-21; H.D. Rankin, 'The Progress of Pessimism in Catullus poems 2-111', *Latomus* 31 (1972), 774-51.

<sup>11</sup> K. Newman, *Roman Catullus and the Modification of the Alexandrian Sensibility* (Hildesheim, 1990), 152. *Phaselus* can refer

4 is usually related not only to 10 but also to 31 (*uenusta Sirmio*) and 46 (*iam uer egelidos..*), and its metre is the same as 29, while Poem 28 mentions Memmius again.<sup>12</sup>

In my reading Poem 4 presents an idea of public service to Rome in the guise of service to someone who has had occasion to traverse through just the area recently added to Rome's possessions by Pompey. The words of one single boat tell a tale of following in the footsteps of imperialist expansion. Observe that a big public story of service to the state is possibly reduced to a little story of the service of one boat, now retired. Similar excesses are noticeable in the surrounding poems, as for example, when the gods and goddesses of love are required to mourn not some cosmic event, but the death of a pet bird. Or the number of kisses required to satisfy a lover by these accounts is zillions, or instead of trooping the colours beds troop around bedrooms. The private arena of Rome becomes the public arena of empire: the place where cosmic events happen not in the skies but in the lap of a loved one, treasury and accounting moves from reckoning numbers in the *aerarium* to counting the number of lovers' kisses, and military forces do not operate abroad but troop around the Roman bedroom, and in poem 4 one boat only, not a fleet, makes a journey to Bithynia.

In reality, Pompey had got 500 ships to get rid of pirates and overcome Mithridates in Bithynia-Pontus during the

---

to a kidney bean (Virg. *Georg.* 1.227) or a painted pleasure boat (Virg. *Georg.* 4.289; Juvenal 15.127-8). Note also a similar pleasure craft in Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe* 2.12, the 'small boat' the rich young men of Methymna sailed in round the shores of Mytilene.

<sup>12</sup> Memmius was a poet also: Cic. *Brut.* 70.247; Ovid, *Trist.* II 433; Gellius, XIX 9.7; A. Baehrens, *Fragmenta Poetarum Romanorum* (Leipzig, 1886), *frg.* 11, 324. On Poem 4, G. Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Latin Poetry* (Oxford, 1968), 190-94; H. Bardon, *L'art de la composition chez Catulle* (Paris, 1943), 14.

sixties BC according to the *lex Gabinia*.<sup>13</sup> Observe how the boat publishes its life story. During its 'life' it has lived in areas spanning a wide geographical spread, implying a public service worthy of note. Perhaps the poem refers to an actual boat as Courtney says in a characteristically trenchant paper: the poem may refer to political events ten years earlier and the yacht is now at an age to retire.<sup>14</sup> The journey as described is an outward one: from the Adriatic to the Cyclades to Rhodes, Thracian Propontis, the Black Sea, and to Mt. Cyturus near the town of Amastris. Incidentally, the return journey is described in Poem 46: from the Phrygian fields to Nicaea to the famous cities of Asia (Pergamum, Ephesus, Sardis), Lesbos, Mytilene, to Rhodes, and back to the centre as it were. The journey becomes a firmly literary and poetic reality. Who says such poems must be confined to the narrow path? The irony is Catullan: a huge geographical area is traversed within exquisite poetic confines. So, it is the case, that in Poem 4 and also in Poem 46 that poetic discourse creates a poetic reality.

Poem 4 asks the reader to believe that such a boat exists, but the belief demanded is of course a belief in a poetic existence, not an actual one. It is amusing that the poetic pedigree of the yacht includes the Argo. It is a craft that traverses the route taken by the Argo in Apollonius' poem, a text known to Catullus.<sup>15</sup> The Argo is the First Boat of all boats. It was born on a mountain in the same area as the *phaselus* and though not as voluble as the *phaselus*, the Argo spoke betimes and sailed to the ends of the known earth.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Plut. *Pomp.* 38; App. *Mith.* 114-15; Dio Cassius 37.7a. In general, see P. de Souza, *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge, 1999), 161-178.

<sup>14</sup> E. Courtney, 'Catullus' Yacht (or was it?)', *Classical Journal* 92 (1997), 113-22.

<sup>15</sup> Catullus, Poem 64. 1-2 sqq.

<sup>16</sup> Thomson (n. 2), 214. See Catullus 64.124. In the *Argonautica*

Observe how the literariness of Catullus' poem is insisted on: a characteristic of 'neoteric' poetry yet still not afraid to challenge the wide canvas of subjects and places characteristic of epic poetry. Ross notes that the mannered geographical description in Poem 4 contains a Catullan coinage – a compound in *-fer* lending the poem a neoteric but an epic edge too.<sup>17</sup> The *phaselus* is built of boxwood presumably since it came from Cytorus famous for its boxwood – *buxifer* the epic formulation in the poem adds to the poetic pedigree. Boxwood was not the usual wood for ships.<sup>18</sup> The epic word *trabis* is used of ships in the same league as the *phaselus* but not quite as fast. Observe how the use of these epic references introduces the idea that the *phaselus* can bring to Rome poetry as significant as epic. Catullus' friend C. Helvius Cinna transports the poetry (*carmina*) of Aratos in just such a way. Cinna served on Memmius' staff with Catullus in Bithynia. All three were interested in poetry. Cinna's poem may date from this time, that is, 57-56BC.<sup>19</sup> Cinna sailed (*uexi*) not in just any boat but in a Bythinian boat, *Prusiaca nauicula*.<sup>20</sup> Further, the poetry he brings back

---

the boat speaks at l. 525 and 4.580-592.

<sup>17</sup> D.O. Ross, *Style and Tradition in Catullus* (Cambridge, MA, 1969), 21; Newman (n. 11), 151, 403, and *passim*.

<sup>18</sup> Thomson (n. 2), 216 *ad loc.* Boxwood was used to make small items such as writing tablets, boxes and musical instruments. Petronius, *Sat.* 58, refers to the boxwood rings, cheap jewels, which do not even impress a freedman. Cytorus was famous for both boxwood and also for fir (*abies*) which was used extensively in the making of ships: Pliny, *NH* 16.71. *Abies* sometimes means 'ship' (e.g. Virg. *Aen.* 8.91; *Aen.* 5.663). For ships and shipbuilding in general, see L. Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World* (Baltimore, 1994), 152.

<sup>19</sup> Morgan (n. 6), 356.

<sup>20</sup> Baehrens (n. 12), 324-6, Helvius Cinna, Poem/*frg.* 11; Newman (n. 11), 346; Prusias: kings of Bithynia in the third and second

with him is written in the dry bark (*in aridulo...libello*) of the mallow plant and it is a gift (*munera*). Catullus, like his friend Cinna mentioned in Poem 10 (and in Poem 95), is bringing poetry of note to rival Epic to Rome on his own little Prusiatic ship. His poems he states in poem 1 are offered as a gift (*cui dono*) in a little book (*libellum*) polished down with dry pumice (*arida...pumice expoliturum*). In the light of Cinna's poem and Catullus' own dedicatory Poem 1, Poem 4 can be seen as a statement, a characteristically allusive one, of how he sees his poetry.<sup>21</sup>

That the boat has such a story makes it almost human – and the personification of the *phaselus* has been noted often: its oars are hands (*palmulis*), its ropes are feet (*pedem*), it can swim and has cognitive abilities and when it was a tree its foliage had a voice. The speech of the boat – where *ait* at the start is a Greek intrusion prompts the notion that the old boat can be characterised according to Coleman as 'an immigrant from the Greek-speaking East'.<sup>22</sup> Virgil perhaps enjoyed this aspect of the poem since the parody in *Catalepton* 10 replaces the boat with a human, namely Sabinus.

Poem 6 is on first reading is a piece of occasional (if anything in Catullus is) verse chiding a friend Flavius for not speaking. Observe how here, as in Poem 4, the poet is in control. Flavius does not speak about his girl, ergo she is a tramp. This type of reluctance is a kind of rule of polite

centuries BC, for example, rejoiced in this proper name.

<sup>21</sup> On the allusiveness of Roman poetry, see e.g. G. B. Conte, *The Rhetoric of Imitation: Genre and Poetic Memory in Virgil and Other Latin Poets* (Cornell, 1986), 32, on Poem 101: 'Catullus must become a navigator'; T.K. Hubbard, 'Intertextual Hermeneutics in Vergil's Fourth and Fifth *Eclogues*', *Classical Journal* 91 (1995), 11-23.

<sup>22</sup> R.G.G. Coleman, 'Poetic Diction: Poetic Discourse and the Poetic Register', in J.N. Adams and R.G. Mayer (eds.), *Aspects of the Language of Latin Poetry* (=PBA 93) (Oxford, 1999), 21-93, at 84.



society as noted by Cicero in noting L.Domitius' silence about Chelidon.<sup>23</sup> This is a convention that Cicero exploits in 56BC in his defence of Caelius where Clodia is presented centre-stage in his argument, thus befitting his characterisation of her, even in the exordium, as a tramp.<sup>24</sup> Flavius' girl must be 'unsmart and unwitty' (*illegidae atque inelegantes*, 6. 2), that is, old-fashioned and dull if he does not speak about her. Catullus will speak about her though, because Flavius' bed shows that she is not unsmart and unwitty, so that she is to be serenaded in his verse just like the charming *phaselus* of Poem 4. The journey of the boat in that poem can be compared to the journey of the lovers' bed around the bedroom in Poem 6. At home in Rome, imperialism brings Syrian oils to telltale pillows. Beds this time, not boats, do the talking through the poet. Again a poetic reality is created but in it one sees the lives of those living in Rome being affected by that imperialism Rome was beginning to engage in. Poem 4 with its mythical overtone describes events far in the past, but the story promised in 6 is one in the future, *dic nobis*. Catullus wants to immortalise the lovers' journey in verse just as he has done for the boat's journey. As in Poem 4, the narrator does all the talking in Poem 6. He *has* actually immortalised the lovers in verse. These poems would be duller and inconsequential except for the fact that the narrator calls attention to his wielding of his poetic power at every turn. He, like many a general at this time, Catullus' friend Pompey for instance, is boldly going where no poets have gone before. He uses the imagery of travel and military service in Bithynia to illustrate the new type of poetry he is which he is creating for a new type of world.

The yacht itself tells its story through the speaker. The

---

<sup>23</sup> *Verr.* 2.1.139-40.

<sup>24</sup> *Pro Cael.* 2.

ironic distancing noticed by Fitzgerald here means that the narrator of Poem 4 is not, of course, the *phaselus*. The speech of the boat is reported to the reader by another and is rendered in *oratio obliqua*. The space between the speaker and the boat has been played down as Fitzgerald says to achieve an urbane distancing with the yacht saying more than it knows, allowing the speaker at wink at us as he reports what it says.<sup>25</sup> It is an old story. In contrast, Poem 6, tells a new story. The narrator inserts his name 'Catullus' so the reader knows now who the imperator/public official disseminating this charming poetry is. The epic journey is in reported speech, the speaker vouches only for the actual poetic presence of the yacht now: *ille, quem videtis* ('that yacht, which you see'). It would be churlish not to see it, and you are *insulsa .. molesta* ('annoyingly un-witty') if you do not see it. You entered into the urbane poetic compact from the start.

Poem 4 ends with the yacht's dedication to Castor and Pollux. It is fitting that a yacht that engaged in service to Rome would be dedicated to the gods revered at Rome, Castor and Pollux. The fact that Castor is the only name mentioned emphasises the Roman aspect since there was an ancient and prominent temple in the forum to these gods, often referred to as *aedes Castoris*.<sup>26</sup> In Roman religion, and noted also by Catullus, Castor and Pollux were gods friendly to sailors (Poem 68.65).<sup>27</sup> Because of this I see no reason to view the *limpidum lacum* as any specific clear lake just a general one that is indicating a place of safety and rest. So this poem

<sup>25</sup> Fitzgerald (n. 7), 109.

<sup>26</sup> Cicero, *Verr.* 2.1.129, 132. See S.B. Platner (revised T. Asby), *A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* (Oxford, 1929), 102-103. The temple was located in the south-east corner of the forum area.

<sup>27</sup> Statius, *Silvae* 4.6.15-16. On *Pollux* as an *alter Castor*, see J. Granarolo, *L'oeuvre de Catulle: aspects religieux, ethiques et stylistiques* (Paris, 1967), 72.

could be set anywhere in Rome. Even in the forum at the temple of Castor. Poetic artifice unites Bithynia and Rome: in a sense the poem is an offering to Roman gods in the Forum. The private is public, or must be public, for Catullus: he composes public verses for occasions, the death of a brother, the return of a friend, the betrayal of a lover. These must be as real for him as Roman territorial expansion, the role of a general and his minions, the glorification of Rome.

In Poem 4 the notion of public service is mythologized and reformed into a new poetic norm with Catullus as its driving force, as its imperator. The incongruity between the *phaselus* and the Argo, the *phaselus* that can imitate exquisitely the nature and travels of the Argo in much shorter and polished poem; between 500 ships it took to subdue Pontus and the one literary yacht that can imitate with ease the task of 500 actual ships, is an incongruity exploited by Catullus brilliantly. The new poet demands as much of his reader as the Epic poet, the new poet marshalls his forces and conquers as wide a territory in verse as the imperator does in reality. The poet becomes the all-powerful general of poetry reporting the speech of mute objects and silencing whoever he likes with his power. The *phaselus* poem becomes an offering from the poet to the gods (*tibi*) and to the reader. The poet's abilities enable him to cover as much territory as the campaigns of generals. It is different territory, but the poet becomes as powerful in Rome as the imperator is because of it.

Comparison between large and small: poet and general, public and private: epic poetry and polymetrics. Virgil need not be the only poet with strong ties to politics as well as poetry. The big epic Troy myth is used in poem 68, for example, to present the private story of the death of a brother. Troy becomes the common tomb of Asia and Europe (Poem 68.89).

Poem 4 provides a link to 10 because persona of Catullus, not the yacht, is the one who has finished a term of duty.

Poem 10 moves away from mythical geography 'places colored by mythical suggestion' or maybe not- and is set around the Roman forum.<sup>28</sup> The story of the yacht's Bithynian travels is replaced by Catullus' boasting about his travels in Bithynia. Braund sees in Poem 10 a kind of defence of Memmius since the speaker of the poem, I suppose he means Catullus, is self-discrediting.<sup>29</sup> Nappa sees Poem 10 as offering a negative portrayal of the Catullan persona.<sup>30</sup> Another says Poem 10 shows Catullus' playful sovereignty over the speaker and the speech, especially his control over poetic discourse, a discourse often associated with the lie.<sup>31</sup> Skinner maintains that Catullus preaches a short parable about the unfairness of the Roman status system.<sup>32</sup> The poem is any and all of these things. He has been in Bithynia on the staff of the praetor Memmius. The big story of public service to the state is reduced to the jaunt of one individual. Mention of the poet Cinna and Memmius invites the reader to identify the narrator with Catullus, and the Catullus who brings new poetry to Rome.

In Poem 10 the myth of poetic power is expressed in a polished and new form: a dialogue near the forum between a man of leisure (*otiosum*) and a girl about the Bithynian other life of the man when he was engaged in *negotium*.<sup>33</sup> In my reading the story of Rome's expansion is contained in the story of one servant to the state, and that servant happens to be a poet. Bithynia is the place from where the narrator,

---

<sup>28</sup> Ross (n. 17), 98.

<sup>29</sup> D.C. Braund, 'The Politics of Catullus 10: Memmius, Caesar, and the Bithynians', *Hermathena* 160 (1996), 45-57, esp. 54.

<sup>30</sup> Nappa (n. 8), 89.

<sup>31</sup> Fitzgerald (n. 7), 179. See Hesiod, *Theogony* 27, also quoted by Cairns (n. 7), 1.

<sup>32</sup> M.B. Skinner, 'Ut Decuit Cinaediorum: Power, Gender, and Urbanity in Catullus 10', *Helios* 16 (1989), 7-23, esp. 19.

<sup>33</sup> Skinner (n. 3), 13.

addressed as Catullus, has recently returned. Similar to the *phaselus* he may or may not be telling the truth: we are wary readers after reading Poem 4. The narrator 'Catullus' appreciates our concerns: he tells us that he did tell the truth at first, 'that which was the case': (*id quod erat*), but then he lets us into the secret. He along with society in general believes that Rome's expansion should benefit him. So at first it is the truth: *id quod erat*, but then he backtracks and says that 'well, yes, I did get an old Bithynian vehicle with 8 carriers despite the useless praetor I had'. A sea-going yacht is abandoned in favour of another mode of transport, the *lecta octophorus* for travel on land, a litter with eight bearers – a local specialty in the province.<sup>34</sup> Catullus is questioned by Varus' unnamed girlfriend and so to appear more substantial to her he tells a lie. *Eureka!* Imperialism actually needs poetry. Poetry can tell apparent lies but these lies if examined will yield a truth. The litter, from Bithynia and Pontus is real, but imaginary in a poetic context in that it turns out to be a purely imaginary possession because the narrator tells us the readers that he has not got even one carrier to carry the leg of a camp bed: Catullus does not own one after all: it is not there for the reader or the *puella* to see. It is here when the gap between the actual benefit and the presumed riches is exposed that the poet reveals his power. The poet's task is to open this space up so that the reader can see this reality. To what effect? Well, in keeping with Catullus' belief in the *status quo* – if you ask any questions about this compact between Rome and its servants you can be deemed *insulsa* and *molesta*. You, like the *puella*, might be a truth seeker – but what benefit does that bring? Catullus manipulates our knowledge of poetry and poetic convention. He manipulates

---

<sup>34</sup> On this litter, and the eastern decadence which such references bring to the Roman mind, see Nappa (n. 8), 90.

the readers' knowledge of political figures and events.<sup>35</sup> There is no reason to identify Catullus with the narrator or the readers with *uos* in either poem. But there is no good reason not to identify with *uos* in terms of the poetic reality of poem 4. We can pretend we are *uos*. By accepting it we can enter into the poetic artifice of the poem. If we pretend we are *uos* in 4 we accept the poetic artifice, we and we alone know that we are not there but we can pretend to be in an ultra urbane compact with the poet. The narrator of Poem 10 we can pretend is Catullus, and if we do we are entering into poetic artifice. Catullus' conversation with the girl begins with Catullus maintaining that he is telling it straight. In Poem 4 the narrator does not vouch for the veracity of the *phaselus'* words. The reader allows *neglegentia* in poem 4. But in Poem 10 the narrator actually says that he is not telling the truth. You may have guessed this already. Unless the reader is *insulsa* and *molesta* she will leave it. But if she is *insulsa* and *molesta* she shows that she is ignorant of poetic truth because she questions it. The *puella* in Poem 10 is only guilty of being ignorant because the narrator wanted to make himself seem more lucky to her, but she was more concerned with Catullus and was not willing to play the poetic game (Poem 10.14-15).

There is always the pull between poetic artifice and reality in this way in Catullus, especially in the poems where Bithynia and the East figure. The notion of what reality is - is always placed before us with mention of Bithynia. The mention of the real place whether it be Bithynia, Syria or Spain seduces the reader into accepting the poetic reality. These new places give Rome a new sense of her own reality in the world. These new poems do exactly the same thing.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Skinner (n. 3), 10.

<sup>36</sup> In Poem 31 'Catullus' comes 'home'. We are invited to view the poet and the narrator as one. We are invited to view Sirmio as

The relationship between the poet and his audience in trying times (much like our own with its talk of regime change and military action) is an urbane compact: don't question the poetic reality. One can see what that reality is. If one questions it the whole artifice will fall apart. It is comparable to the relationship of a general with the public: The truth is not an issue so long as everything looks as expected. The essence of imperialism is to ask no questions and one will get told no lies. For in the new imperialism of new poetry, the poet grants the power to speak, he is the one who creates the truth on his own terms and he makes the poems poetic reality. If one gets nothing out of his poetry, then 'nugatory' in its pejorative sense might be a good epithet for them. But then one is outside the loop, no friend of Cinna, Catullus, Veranius or Licinius. One has no prospect of ever being lucky or blessed or happy: *beatior*. The adjective *beatus* describes the state of one who has gained from Rome's expansion in these poems. It also describes the one who has gained from playing the game of the new poetry. Observe in Poem 9 Catullus describes the homecoming of Veranius as happy news: 'You have arrived! What happy news!' (*uenisti. O mihi nuntii beati!* 9.5) which makes him happy: 'Who is more joyful or is happier than me?' (*quid me laetius est beatiusue?* 9.11) Observe that in Poem 9 the soldier, service to the state, and family relations and friendships become the subject of a new poem – and a short un-epic type of poem. There is a pattern too of similarity and difference in Poem 6 and Poem 9. Catullus presents himself before two of his

---

home. It is a place of rest after travels in Bithynia. While we can do this, there is no need to do so, since, as Cairns (n. 7), 2, says, the poem is about the 'process of conveyance' which forms 'an impermeable barrier between us and any questions we might ask about Catullus own emotions'. The emotion noted in this poem is joy at coming home from Thynia (in Thrace) and the plains of Bithynia.

friends one, Flavius, who is soldiering in the service of love the other, Veranius, in the service of the state. In Poem 6 Favius' girlfriend is a 'whore'. In Poem 9 Veranius' loved ones and family surround him. Flavius won't tell Catullus about his girl- but in Poem 9 Catullus looks forward to Veranius' account of his travels and his worthy toil on behalf of Rome. Though, like Flavius, Veranius still has to spill the beans, Catullus makes poems of them all.

In sum, from these short observations on Poem 4 and selected poems close to it in the *libellus*, our poet Catullus could never be addressed ironically as *imperator* or supreme master of his art. He is truly the poetic *imperator* and rivals in his poetic power Caesar, Pompey and Mamurra in their power as generals. These figures are addressed ironically or even satirically elsewhere in the collection: *imperator unice/cinaede Romule*.<sup>37</sup> Another public figure, Cicero is similarly ironically addressed (presumably because of his long speeches!) in Poem 49. The generals move across the world in a prodigal and prolix way: too many ships, too much power, too much money, with too much show and too little elegance and control. How unlike the polished and controlled poet who uses the image of Bithynia-Pontus, first, to capture his audience's attention, and then to lay the riches of his poetic power before them!

To conclude, we note that in Sean O'Casey's play, *The Plough and the Stars* there is a similar mix of literary virtuosity and politics.<sup>38</sup> Set in 1916, the play was written in the nineteen-twenties and first performed in February 1926.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Poems 29.5, and Poem 11 (in the same metre as Poem 4), and Poem 54.7.

<sup>38</sup> See L. Pilkington, *Theatre and State in Twentieth Century Ireland* (London, 2001), Chapter 4, 'Cumann na nGaedhal and the Abbey Theatre', esp. 99-102.

<sup>39</sup> C. Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre* (Cambridge, 2002), 163-171.



The title of my paper comes from a line in a song sung to Nora by her husband who later dies in the 1916 Rising (rebellion) promising her happier times – happier transports to be. ‘Happier transports’ signifies the real pleasure and the emotion that the reader gets from the ‘transport’ poems of Catullus. These poems were no less controversial and revolutionary in the troubled times when they first appeared than O’Casey’s play was when it was first performed. Gifts to us, the readers, in a sense the poems are also dedications to the intrepid reader who will enter into the poetic journey to cultivate new places with the poet as *imperator*. Catullus makes a new myth out of the East. This myth is expressed in a traditional form first in Poem 4: Hellenistic grave epigram, with a mythical type of boat that talks and retraces mythical journeys to the East, the mythical area from which the ultimate Roman myth of Troy originates, that is, the very place where all dreams of Roman imperialism can be realized in poetry. But what is poetry only a lie? It is best to believe the poet and allow him the leeway he pleads for in Poem 10, because it is the place of the poet as narrator, and now *imperator*, to explain the new Rome. He creates a new world: happier transports there will be, but only if you serve under him.