

Catullus 8 and 76: Partner Poems Expressing a Mind
Fragmented by Love

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As Catullus writes of his experiences with Lesbia, he often expresses the weight placed upon his mind due to her wrongdoings. In poem 75, he goes so far as to say: "*Huc est mens deducta tua mea, Lesbia, culpa, / atque ita se officio perdidit ipsa suo,*" (my mind has been led to this by your crime, Lesbia, and thus it destroys itself by its own duty, Catullus 75.1-2). Since Lesbia has lied to and hurt Catullus multiple times, his mind has been split between wanting to pursue her and wanting to abandon her. Two poems in particular, 8 and 76, present this division explicitly. Both poems present a struggle for dominance between these two mindsets, but in poem 8 his reason is more commanding, while in 76 his reason is weaker and more confused. Catullus exhibits this difference through his particular word choice within each poem, as well as his use of similar themes and ideas. Poem 8 is more playful and focused on both Catullus and Lesbia, while poem 76 is heavier and more reflective. The connections between the two poems seem to resemble Catullus' state of mind as time goes on: at first he jests about the situation, and then he takes a more serious and worried tone. Several scholars have discussed the idea of Catullus' fragmented mind within these two poems. One scholar in particular, M. Dyson, writes about poem 8 in his essay *Catullus 8 and 76*: "An expression of unhappiness leads through a process

of reasoning in which suppressed emotion almost breaks out, to a demand for self-control and a proclamation of victory.”¹ While Dyson considers how Catullus suppresses his emotion with his reason, he fails to acknowledge how much control desire has in both 8 and 76.

Poem 8: The Playful Call-to-Action

In poem 8, Catullus first examines the theme of a mind divided by love in a somewhat witty manner by presenting the emotional side of himself as “*Miser Catulle*,” a lovesick fool. Marilyn B. Skinner points out the view of two prior critics, E.P. Morris and A.L. Wheeler, that “the ‘*Miser Catulle*’ is a witty, lighthearted adaption of a familiar erotic motif... but humor maintains an ironic control over self-pity.”² Perhaps the rational side of Catullus uses humor to mitigate his confusion and depression, but we cannot forget that, as H. Akbar Khan writes: “*miser* is indicative of a state of mind wholly in thrall to passion.”³ Already we catch a glimpse at the division in Catullus’ mind through this opening word. The next few lines display this split mindset quite straightforwardly:

et quod vides perisse perditum ducas.
Fulsere quondam candidi tibi soles,
cum ventitabas quo puella ducebat...”

¹ M. Dyson, “Catullus 8 and 76,” 136.

² Marilyn B. Skinner, “Catullus 8: The Comic “Amator” as “Eiron,” 299-300.

³ H. Akbar Khan, “Style and Meaning in Catullus’ Eighth Poem,” 556.

(and consider to be lost what you see has been ruined. The suns once shone brightly for you, when you were following to wherever the girl was leading; 8.2-4). The tone of the poem shifts from commanding to reflective and nostalgic. The repetition of the verb “*duco*” helps display this change. First, it is used as a jussive subjunctive where reasonable Catullus orders lovesick Catullus to lead his mind aright. Afterwards, it is used as an indicative imperfect verb with the girl as the subject. While this section of the poem may seem to be an acknowledgement of the good times in the past, it also displays Catullus’ weakness in how he believes that his life was *candidior*, brighter, when the girl was leading him around, rather than how he must now lead himself. Catullus presents the opposing pursuits of his mind: one is looking towards the future while the other is stuck in the past. Yet not only is he reminiscing; he seems to have hope that his relationship is not over. Instead of saying that he followed to wherever the girl *duxit*, led, he uses the imperfect which expresses an incomplete action. He does this with most of the verbs in the reminiscent section of the poem. Ellen Greene discusses how this section displays the division as well: “The transformation from *quondam* to *vere* signals the change in the speaker's mind from distanced reflection on the past to a complete absorption in it.”⁴ The repetition of this particular idea – “*fulsere vere candidi tibi soles,*” (the suns truly shone brightly

⁴ Ellen Greene, “The Catullan Ego: Fragmentation and the Erotic Self,” *The American Journal of Philology* 116, no. 1 (1995): 80.

for you; 8.8) – illustrates the idea of the sun rising and setting. This image adds more hopefulness to the memory; though the sun has set on his past relationship, Catullus hopes that one day the sun will rise again, as it typically does, and he can be with Lesbia once more.

Dyson argues that this reflection on the past is not something Catullus is emotionally invested in:

The past is not sentimentalized or exalted, it is, if anything, played down, *illa multa iocosa*, 6. The expression, traditional as it is in lovers' language, may well be restrained and tender, but it smacks of appreciation. There is an overwhelming simplicity in *amata nobis quantum amabitur nulla*, 5, but the speaker is not primarily defining the quality of his affection; rather he wants himself to realize how lucky he has been in his once-in-a-lifetime experience.⁵

While I agree that this characterization is simplified, I believe that this is the rational side of Catullus restraining his emotional side as best as possible, holding him back from getting too lost in reminiscing. Within this section, it is clear that the person who truly holds the power is the memory of Lesbia. This is explained immediately in how Catullus remembers that he followed her where she led him. The only time in this section that Catullus is in control is in the verb *volebas*, depicting his desire. The role of the subject is taken from him time and time again while the focus remains elsewhere: *amata* is translated “she was loved,” *amabitur* as “she will be loved,” and even when talking about the

⁵ Dyson, “Catullus 8 and 76,”: 135.

iocosa, the times full of laughter, he uses *fiabant* (they were being made) rather than saying that he and his girl were making many of these joyful times. At the same time, Catullus uses litotes in saying *nec puella nolebat*, the girl was not unwilling, to show that the only reason these joyful times happened was because the girl was not against them. Despite the attempt of Catullus' rationality to restrain these memories, they still have a large impact upon his emotion.

Catullus then shifts his addressee from himself to the girl, as if now, after his insistent commanding, he is strong enough to face her, although it is clear he is not from the previous sections:

*Vale, puell(a)! Iam Catullus obdurat,
nec te requiret, nec rogabit invitam.
At tu dolebis, cum rogaberis nulla.*

(Farewell, girl! Now Catullus stands firm,/ nor will he seek you out again, nor will he ask for you unwilling; 8.12-14). Although he is speaking to the girl, he refers to himself in the third person, claiming that he will not pursue her any longer. Once again, Catullus uses the present tense in the verb *obdurat* and matches it with the word *iam*, "now," to emphasize the present. This displays a certainty about how obdurate Catullus currently is, but no certainty about how strong he will be in the future. By referring to himself in the third person, Catullus expresses a schism within himself, almost as if now he cannot be held responsible for any action he commits because of his emotions.

It is the reasonable side of him that claims he will not pursue her, but the emotional part does not have a say, nor does his reason simply say “I will not pursue you.” The two verbs that he chooses to include, *requiret* and *rogabit*, both have double meanings. *Requiret* can mean to seek again, which references his continual pursuit of her, but it can also mean to desire. *Rogabit* here can mean to ask for, in the sense of inviting someone on a date, while at the same time it can mean to beg for. These verbs, which Catullus claims he will not act on, refer to an emotion that he cannot easily control: desire.

Catullus then turns away from himself and back to Lesbia, saying *dolebit*, she will suffer or lament, when she will be sought by no one. This statement perhaps refers to Catullus himself, who is suffering because now that his girl has left him he has no one, which may explain why he is able to claim she will suffer – he is experiencing it himself. Catullus seems to insult her by saying “*scelestā, vae te!*” (wretch, woe to you! 8.15), yet the word *vae* carries an implication of pity, as if he feels badly for her if she will not have anyone to be with. The word *scelestā*, while it means wretch, also carries the implication that she has committed a crime, suggesting that he believes it was wrong of her to leave him. Following this, Catullus launches into a series of questions intended to show the girl how miserable her life will now be:

...*Quae tibi manet vita?*

Quis nunc t(e) adibit? Cui videberis bella?

Quem nunc amabis? Cuius esse diceris?

Quem basiabis? Cui labella mordebis?

(What remains to you in life?/ Who now will go to you? To whom will you seem beautiful?/ Whom now will you love? Whose will you be said to be?/ Whom will you kiss? For whom will you bite the little lips? 8.15-18). This choice holds many implications. Instead of stating that none of these things will happen to her, the questions seem to express Catullus' emotions – as Dyson notes, the questions do not focus only on the action, “but on the person involved. ‘You won’t have me to give you that’ gives way to ‘It won’t be me and I wish it were.’”⁶ The question “*quem basiabis*” calls to mind poems 5 and 7 concerning all the kisses he wished to share with Lesbia. At the same time, the reasonable side of him knows that it is unlikely that she has no one: the repetition of who, who now, who now, etc. conveys a sense of Lesbia moving from guy to guy. Still, he cannot help but fantasize specifically about how she will be “biting the little lips.” Catullus has to catch himself after this last question and remind himself: “*tu, Catulle, destinatus obdura,*” (you, stubborn Catullus, remain strong; 8.19). The use of the word *destinatus* is peculiar. It seems as if the side focused on reason believes the emotional side is being stubborn and not following the directions given. This is emphasized in the fact that Catullus begins by ordering with a jussive subjunctive, a weaker command form, and then switching to blunt imperatives,

⁶ Dyson, “Catullus 8 and 76”: 135.

as if he is applying more force to what he is saying. Clearly there is a battle for dominance occurring in his mind.

Poem 76: The Emotional Prayer for Help

Although poem 76 seems to express the rational side of Catullus in control, considering the higher diction and more complex syntax, a closer look reveals that his mind is still fragmented, and he continues to think about Lesbia. One particular example of this fragmentation within the poem is the amount of elisions; there are thirty-one in total, while poem 8 only held five. Not only does this illustrate his broken mind, but when read aloud it sounds as if he is tripping over his words, desperately praying for help to come as quickly as possible. Simultaneously, we see Catullus using second person to address himself, displaying his divided mind once more.

The entire first section of this poem explicitly acts as an acknowledgement of Catullus' piety, and how he deserves happiness because of his good deeds, while in truth it holds language that relates back to the strife with Lesbia from poem 8. The first line, "*siqua recordanti benefacta priora voluptas/ est homini...*" (if there is any pleasure for a man remembering former services; 76.1-2), holds religious connotations in *benefacta*, but this word harkens back to how Lesbia was leading Catullus (*ducebas*) as if he was her servant. The word *voluptas* also holds the idea of physical pleasure, again relating back to his former relationship with Lesbia. These aren't the only words that connote some sort of sexual relationship;

sanctam fidem can mean loyalty, as one partner should be to another, *foedere* can be “applied to a marriage bond; also to other sexual unions,” (O.L.D.), and *gaudia* also can mean physical delights. While Dyson seems to believe that the piety Catullus mentions compares “with those of a man who has been *pious* in general,”⁷ he does not consider that perhaps Catullus means to say he has been faithful in his relationship to Lesbia. Catullus cannot be pious in general, because his relationship with Lesbia is adulterous in nature. Ellen Greene comments on this: “In the first place, the erotic principles of *fides*, *sancta amicitia*, and *foedus* are actually fallacious in light of Lesbia’s unfaithfulness and betrayal of her husband.”⁸ All three of Catullus’ examples of piety seem to express Lesbia’s unfaithfulness and deceit towards Catullus. He expresses that he has not acted as she has, and therefore deserves the delights of loyalty. The statement “*nec foedere nullo/ divum ad fallendos numine abusum homines*,” (nor in no sacred trust to have abused the power of the divine in order to deceive men; 76.3-4) enforces this idea. Although adorned with words speaking of the gods, it clearly tells of how Lesbia has not just deceived one man, but *homines*, Catullus and her own husband. Despite the reasonable idea of praying on behalf of piety, the hidden meanings of Catullus’ diction show that the emotional side of him is still

⁷ Dyson, “Catullus 8 and 76”: 140.

⁸ Greene, “The Catullan Ego”: 88.

hung up on Lesbia. The two sides are just acting simultaneously in this instance, rather than one trying to control the other.

Catullus signals through his diction the relationship between poem 76 and 8 in order to illustrate further the results of a fragmented mind. Just as in 8 he wrote “*multa iocosa*,” in 76 he writes “*multa gaudia*.” However, here he is referring to how “there are many joys remaining in life outside of this thankless love,” rather than the many joys in his relationship with Lesbia. Yet despite this statement’s rationality, Catullus places the word “*gaudia*” in between “*ingrato*” and “*amore*” (*ingrato gaudia amore* 76.6). This communicates to his reader that the emotional side of the mind persistently sees the joys of the world in his past relationship, just as it did in poem 8. Another connection comes in the form of questions: while in 8 the speaker was asking multiple questions to Lesbia, here he asks to himself “*Quin tu animo offirmas atque istinc teque reducis, / et dis invitis desinis esse miser?*” (why do you not toughen up your mind and lead yourself away from that one again, and cease to be wretched before the unwilling gods? 76.11-12). These questions remind the reader of the commands from 8: how he tells himself to *obdura*, not to seek Lesbia again, and not to *vive miser* “live as a miserable man.” Coincidentally, the word “*miser*” appears in this poem three times – as “*misereri*,” “*miser*,” and “*miserum*” – which further connects this version of Catullus back to the version of Catullus in poem 8. The use of the verb *reducis* resembles how previously Catullus told himself to *ducas* in

poem 8, as if he tried to lead himself away but has failed, and must *reducis*, lead himself again.

While the prayer may seem hopeful in that Catullus wants help and wants to be rid of this burden, his fragmented mind does not seem to want to let go:

difficile est, verum hoc qua lubet efficias.

Una salus haec est, hoc est tibi pervincendum;

hoc facias, sive id non pote sive pote.

O di, si vestrum est misereri...

eripite hanc pestem perniciemque mihi,

(it is difficult [to set aside a long love], but in truth you must do this by whatever means you can. This is the one safety, this must be conquered by you; you must do this, whether it is not possible or whether it is. O gods, if it is of you to be pitiful... tear this plague and illness from me; 76.14-17,20). After acknowledging the difficulty of this task, the rational side of Catullus gives the task of getting over this desire to the emotional side of him. He uses jussive subjunctives (*efficias* and *facias*) and passive periphrastic (*pervincendum est*), but he does not use any blunt imperatives here, nor ever in this piece while speaking to himself. This lightens the commands, while also illustrating how much weaker the rational aspect of Catullus has become. Delegating this responsibility to the emotional side is irrational, considering that that side of him has the desire to stay with Lesbia. He says explicitly how it must be conquered “*tibi*,” by you, not by himself. The weakness continues in the speaker’s

consideration of the option that overcoming this obstacle is “*non pote*,” not possible. In poem 8, this was not brought up; the speaker just blatantly ordered the emotional side to stand firm. After this suggestion, the speaker turns to ask the gods for help, as if he already knows that the emotional part of his mind is not able to conquer this illness. The verb *eripite* displays this struggle; it can mean “to tear away from,” as if part of Catullus is clinging tightly to Lesbia and refusing to let go. He calls this illness a *torpor*, which can be translated as “paralysis.” The use of this word shows that this desire he has for Lesbia runs so deeply within him that he is unable to commit to any action. Catullus is paralyzed by his fragmented mind.

Catullus ends poem 76 with a final plea that reiterates the struggle in his mind between wanting Lesbia and wanting to leave Lesbia, unlike poem 8 where he ends with a blunt command. He prays:

*ipse valere opto et taetrum hunc deponere morbum.
O di, reddite mi hoc pro pietate mea.*

(I wish myself to be well and to shake off this foul disease. O gods, return this to me on behalf of my loyalty; 76.25-26). Catullus says that he wishes to be well and to shake off his illness, but never does he explicitly state that he wants Lesbia gone from his life. *Morbum* has connotations of a bodily disease, as if he only wishes to be freed from the paralysis in his body, not from Lesbia herself. The last line of the poem, although it seems like a concluding prayer, holds a great deal of ambiguity.

Catullus asks that the gods “return this to me,” but he does not quite specify what the “this” is. Perhaps this refers back to the masculine word “*amore*,” which he used earlier in the poem. It is possible that while referring to his prayer, he is also subtly asking the gods to return the love he once had to him.

Poems 8 and 76 are clearly meant to act as “partner poems.” They both deal with the theme of mind fragmentation because of desire, and both exhibit a battle between rationale and emotion. While poem 8 tends to display reason commanding the whims of emotion, poem 76 shows reason handing the control over to emotion, which Catullus illustrates through his multi-layered diction. Many critics, such as M. Dyson, notice these themes and connections, but they do not realize how interlocked these two poems actually are. The poet Catullus uses these two characters, the reasonable speaker and the love-struck character, to display both a humorous call-to-action and a confused and depressed prayer for peace of mind. At the end of these two, the reader is left wondering still whether reason or emotion ended up victorious.

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