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Excerpt

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## I

Francis Cairns

*VENUSTA SIRMIO*

Catullus 31

Paeneinsularum, Sirmio, insularumque  
 ocelle, quascumque in liquentibus stagnis  
 marique uasto fert uterque Neptunus,  
 quam te libenter quamque laetus inuiso,  
 uix mi ipse credens Thuniam atque Bithunos 5  
 liquisse campos et uidere te in tuto.  
 o quid solutis est beatius curis,  
 cum mens onus reponit, ac peregrino  
 labore fessi uenimus larem ad nostrum,  
 desideratoque acquiescimus lecto? 10  
 hoc est quod unum est pro laboribus tantis.  
 salue, o uenusta Sirmio, atque ero gaude  
 gaudente; uosque, o Lydiae lacus undae,  
 ridete quidquid est domi cachinnorum.

13 *gaudente* Bergk: *gaude* O: *gaudete* X

## THE EMOTIONS OF POET AND READER

Catullus' homecoming poem addressed to his villa at Sirmio is one of his most attractive lyrics. Its effusive representation of that universal human sentiment, love for home, shows us clearly why Catullus is reckoned to be outstanding among Latin poets as a creator of the illusion of spontaneity.

A superficial reader might happily be deceived by this illusion. He would have some justification: the 'deceptive' power of poetry is one of its most basic characteristics. Hesiod, who obviously disapproved, made the Muses say to him on Helicon: 'we know how to tell many untrue things, making them appear true' (*Theogony* 27). But the scholarly critic is more exacting: he is not so much interested in his own feelings about the poem. Rather he wants to know the intentions of the poem and the ways in which these intentions have been carried out;

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and this involves a stringent effort to discover the meaning of the poem on all its levels.

In these terms Catullus' own feelings are irrelevant to poem 31. We can well believe – although we cannot know – that Catullus felt warmly towards his home at Sirmio. But the poem is not a simple expression of love for home; it is a complex effort to convey this emotion to a reader. The process of conveyance forms an impermeable barrier between us and any questions we might ask about Catullus' own emotions. To us as critical readers, it does not matter whether Catullus really felt the emotion conveyed by a poem or not; the poem can stand by itself as a medium of expression. Of course its seemingly artless simplicity is the principal means whereby the emotion is conveyed.

When we investigate and expound 31 we are not attempting to dissect the reader's experience of the poem. We are investigating the poem itself as objectively as possible. The situation has physical parallels: we can for example investigate the chemical properties of sodium chloride and study their physiological interaction with the human taste-buds; but we cannot with any success describe or analyse the taste of salt. The investigation of poetry differs however in one important respect from the investigation of salt. No amount of scientific erudition will help us taste salt better or more intensely. But the scholarly investigation of poetry, especially poetry of other ages and cultures than our own, does help us towards a truer and deeper experience of the poem. It does so partly by clearing from our minds irrelevant and prejudiced attitudes, which could generate in us false reactions; and partly by informing us about the intellectual content of poetry. So while we cannot compel the 'romantic' to read commentaries on Catullus, we can advise him to do so. Our grounds are that if he does not, he is in danger of splashing in a bath of ignorant and self-generated sentimentality which has nothing to do with Catullus. The application of scholarship to Catullus 31 ought then to produce a deeper and more objective appreciation of it and enable it to be read with a more mature and reasoned pleasure.

#### POETIC CRAFTSMANSHIP

Catullus was one of a group of Roman poets who adopted the ideals of the Greek 'Alexandrian' literary movement.<sup>1</sup> In his prologue poem (1) he claimed as the hallmarks of his poetry the Alexandrian virtues: fine finish and sophistication in the laboured treatment of small scale work, learning and originality.<sup>2</sup> Technical expertise and careful composition

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are of course characteristic of all good poetry in antiquity, non-Alexandrian as well as Alexandrian. But in his conscious proclamation and intensive practice of them Catullus is typically Alexandrian. Some of Catullus' craftsmanship in 31 can easily be detected. Something as simple as the relative lengths of individual words demonstrates it well. The first three lines are particularly interesting in this respect. The word-lengths (with *in liquentibus* in line 2 taken as one word-unit) are:

line 1 5, 3, 5  
 line 2 3, 3, 5, 2  
 line 3 3, 2, 1, 3, 3

Here Catullus is employing a traditional device which goes back to remote antiquity. J. D. Denniston describes the opening sentence of Herodotus' history in these words:

'The power of the sentence is heightened by the relative word-lengths, the four sweeping polysyllables with which it opens being followed by a series of short words (a rhythmic effect which we can observe also in the openings of the *De Rerum Natura* and Sappho's ode to Aphrodite).'<sup>3</sup>

Catullus is doing something similar. The longer words of the first line are followed by the run of shorter words in lines 2–3, broken only by *in liquentibus* in line 2. We can see the effect which Catullus achieves by this device: the praise of Sirmio, a place making its first appearance in literature (see below, pp. 8–9), is made to sound more impressive. Catullus' use of similar patterns of word-lengths to obtain an effect of anticlimax and parody can be seen at the beginning of poem 3.

The remainder of Catullus 31 also shows a delicate sense of balance in word-lengths. Notable is line 10 standing in contrast to line 9 and line 11. It is unlikely that every detail of the word-length patterning is Catullus' conscious creation. But an easy and partly unconscious achievement of balance and alternation between long and short words characterizes the fully trained, competent and careful craftsman-poet. It makes for a flowing, pleasing and natural-sounding diction.

Another very basic and easily observable aspect of poetic craftsmanship is the poet's care to vary the positions of pauses within his lines. This usually involves variation in the use of end-stopped and enjambed lines (for which see below, p. 19 and n. 2). Catullus' care for this in 31 is easy to see. If stopped lines are symbolized by *S* and enjambed lines by *E*, we observe the following pattern:

*E E S S E S S E S S S E E S*

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Besides illustrating Catullus' poetic technique this analysis helps with the textual problem in line 13. One of our manuscripts gives us the reading *gaude* which is unmetrical and does not make sense. Another offers *gaudete*. With the latter reading the line has meaning. But if this reading were correct then both lines 12 and 13 would be end-stopped. This would mean that six successive lines (9–14), with no significant internal pauses to break them up, would be end-stopped. Such wooden regularity is not normal Catullan practice. Bergk's emendation *gaudente*, as well as its other advantages (see below, p. 5), turns lines 12 and 13 into enjambed lines. This affords the desired variety in pause-structure; and the fact that it does so favours *gaudente*.

Besides noting whether a line is enjambed or end-stopped, we can distinguish various strengths of enjambment or end-stopping. The end-stop at 10, for example, is stronger than at 3; the enjambment at 1 carries the reader over to 2 with greater force than he is carried from 5 to 6. Further variety is introduced into enjambment when different cases run on to pauses at different points in the next lines. *ocelle* (line 2) and *gaudente* (line 13) take us three syllables into the next line to a pause; but the enjambment from lines 2 and 5 take us to the end of lines 3 and 6 respectively. All these variations prevent the poem becoming monotonous or rhythmically repetitive at any place. The metrical regularity of the iambic scazon is subtly counterpointed by the studied irregularity of the poet's speaking voice.

The details of technique so far observed are accessible on the surface, although they are no less interesting for this. We could add to them, if we wished, some account of the sounds of the words chosen by Catullus and their relation to the meaning of the poem. But this is something every reader can do for himself. It is more interesting to go on to less obvious aspects of poetic technique. One is grammatical variation. For example there are considerable differences in the grammatical status of verbs: lines 1–6 are a statement in the indicative; 7–10 are still in the indicative but are a 'rhetorical' question; 11 returns to statement and 12–14 are in the imperative mood of command. Similarly descriptions of Sirmio (1–3, 12–14) are mingled with reflections on Catullus' travels (4–6, 8–10) and with generalizations (7, 11). These variations overlap. The effect is one of alert liveliness; the poem is never regular or capable of being anticipated.

A fair number of figures of speech and of thought are found in Catullus 31. In line 1 there is assonance and homoeoteleuton<sup>4</sup> in the repeated *insularum*. Catullus prevented this sound-play from becoming trite by placing *que* at the end of the second *insularum*. Another asson-

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ance combined with polyptoton (for which see below, p. 70) appears in *gaude gaudente* (12–13). This may be an elegant imitation of a Greek turn of phrase like χαίρωντι . . . χαίρων ('you rejoicing to me rejoicing', Homer, *Odyssey* 17. 83) (see below, pp. 11–12). Line 4 employs anaphora (the repetition of a word at the beginning of successive clauses, phrases or verses) in *quam . . . quamque*. In lines 8–10 three clauses describe the joy of homecoming. In lines 12–14, three commands constitute an 'ascending tricolon'<sup>5</sup> climaxing in the last line. In each case the three clauses are deliberately varied to avoid any suggestion of the prosaic or monotonous. Lines 8–10 show differences in clause length, with the longest clause in the centre. This prevents the final clause of the three becoming so weighty that the poem comes to a halt at line 10. The positions of the verb differ in the three clauses; and there is a deliberate and obvious grammatical variation. In lines 12–14 the first two clauses are short, the third longer than the first two put together. The weight of length is given to the final clause because the poem ends at this point. The positions and grammar of the verbs are again varied.

All these figures and especially the two tricola are meant to convey the plenitude of Catullus' emotions and to give the impression of a man carried away by his feelings. The same joy and pleasure is expressed in other kinds of fullness of language throughout the poem. So in the first few lines we have a style almost reminiscent of Ciceronian rotundity:

paeneinsularum ~ insularumque	(1)
liquentibus stagnis ~ marique uasto	(2–3)
libenter ~ laetus	(4)
Thuniam ~ Bithunos	(5)

Note however that three times out of four he places one of the pair at the end of a line, at the point where the 'limping' trochaic rhythm is found. Thus one of each pair is contrasted rhythmically with its complement, which occurs in the earlier iambic part of a line. We also find this expansive tendency in the indefinite clauses (*quascumque* . . ., 2; *quidquid* . . ., 14) (*te*, 4, 6; *mi ipse*, 5; *nostrum*, 9; *uosque*, 13), in the phrase *hoc est quod unum est* (11) and in the uses of the emotional *o* (7, 12, 13).

But Catullus, although aiming at effusiveness in poem 31, never lapses into the fault of looseness of composition. Tautness is achieved by his habit of constantly setting words in tension with, opposition to, or concordance with each other. These little touches sharpen the intellectual edge of the poem. So *liquentibus stagnis* (2), designating lakes, is answered by *uasto mari* (3), the sea. *inuiso* (4) is picked up by

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*uidere* (6). The central section contains multiple contrast and complementation: *solutis curis* (7) corresponding to *onus reponit* (8), *peregrino* (8) contrasting with *larem nostrum* (9), *fessi* (9) contrasting with *acquiescimus* (10), *labore* (9) contrasting with *lecto* (10). Framing the whole section is *curis* (7) corresponding to *laboribus* (11).

These then are some of the detailed resources of Catullus' poetic technique. A more general technical problem faced by Catullus is one of the most difficult faced by all professional lyric poets. This is the problem of how to give the audience in brief all the information it needs to understand the poem while avoiding a tedious statement of facts. In poem 31 Catullus must convey to his audience the following information: 'I have just returned from Bithynia to my beloved home at Sirmio. I did not enjoy being abroad and I am glad to be back.' At the beginning of the poem Catullus deliberately postpones giving hard information. He launches straight away into three lines of colourful praise of Sirmio. These three lines tell the reader little, although there is some informational content. The reader who has begun not even knowing what Sirmio is now knows that Catullus likes Sirmio very much and that Sirmio is either an island or a peninsula. But the main point of these lines is not to give information. They are meant to intrigue the reader and awaken his interest in Sirmio and in the poet's attachment to it.

It is because the reader's curiosity is aroused and his imagination stimulated in the first three lines that Catullus is able to slip most of the information necessary for understanding of the poem into lines 5 and 6: he has left Bithynia behind and is now safely at Sirmio. These two informative lines are strategically placed between 4, in which Catullus tells us something we already know from 1–3 (that he likes Sirmio), and 7, in which Catullus does some general philosophizing. Lines 4 and 7 are deliberately non-informative: they are meant to disguise and palliate the informativeness of 5–6. Catullus' skill extends even to an indirect presentation of the facts of 5–6. We are not told them as plain facts but as something Catullus can 'hardly believe'. The calculated interplay of personality and fact in this presentation is typical of the best kind of writer.

Catullus has reserved one very important fact until line 8 – that Sirmio is his home. The effect of not revealing his relationship to Sirmio for so long is to keep the reader in suspense and so retain his attention. In lines 8–10 Catullus finally reveals his relationship to Sirmio. As in lines 5–6, this fact is expressed indirectly. The general reflection begun by Catullus in line 7 is continued in lines 8–10:

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‘What is nicer than coming home after wearying foreign travel?’ Since Catullus has already told us in 5–6 that he has been abroad, we naturally assume that Sirmio is the home to which he has returned. The poet shows his skill by allowing us to draw a conclusion here rather than simply giving us a fact. The general reflection also implies a second fact about Catullus’ stay abroad; it was wearisome. This fact is cleverly represented as an additional reason for Catullus’ joy at being home. The first informative section (5–6) was framed between the generalities of 4 and 7; 7 is a centrepiece in the poem and combines with 11 to form a generalizing frame for 8–10. By 11, therefore, we know all the facts we need to know; and Catullus uses a second non-informative address to Sirmio to complete the poem.

This analysis reveals an interesting structure of information conveyance. The poem is constructed like a double sandwich. The first section (1–4), third section (7) and fifth section (11–14) are repetitive, non-informative expressions of Catullus’ love for Sirmio and of his pleasure at returning there. The hard core of factual information is sandwiched between these relatively non-factual expressions of feeling; it forms the second and fourth sections of the poem (5–6, 8–10). The particular artistic technique found here is also used, for example, in poem 9, the *prophetikon* (welcome-home poem) for Veranius’ return from Spain.<sup>6</sup>

We can usefully analyse Catullus 31 also in terms of another kind of structure – that of thematic content. The themes of the poem are arranged in the commonest pattern found in ancient poetry – a ‘ring’. The description ‘ring-composition’ is sometimes applied to poems which end with a repetition and further development of their initial concept. But in the case of Catullus 31 I am using the term to mean a structure in which not one but all the themes recur. The central point is sometimes a unique and non-repeated theme (as e.g. in the form *A B C D C B A*); but sometimes, as in Catullus 31, the central theme is yet another expression of one of the surrounding themes. A ring-structure provided a convenient framework upon which ancient poets could arrange their material. In addition it had the advantages of artistic symmetry and of allowing the poet to achieve subtle contrasts between his two treatments of a single theme. Finally, an ancient poet’s audience anticipated that he might employ this device. Their expectation therefore eased the problem of communication between writer and reader.

In Catullus 31 the ring-structure is easy to detect. Sirmio is named and apostrophized at 1 and 12; and the subject of both 1–3 and 12–14

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is praise of Sirmio and its lake. The body of the lyric lies between two general expressions of Catullus' pleasure at coming home – lines 4 and 11. Line 7, another such expression, is the centre-piece of the poem. The two informational passages (5–6 and 8–10) are parallel in function and content, the second being a development upon and addition to the first. So we can schematize the poem roughly as follows:

<i>A</i> <sup>1</sup>	1–3	Praise of Sirmio
<i>B</i> <sup>1</sup>	4	C.'s pleasure in seeing Sirmio (his home)
<i>C</i> <sup>1</sup>	5–6	C.'s journey and return
<i>B</i> <sup>2</sup>	7	The pleasure of freedom from care
<i>C</i> <sup>2</sup>	8–10	Homecoming after work abroad
<i>B</i> <sup>3</sup>	11	The pleasure of homecoming and freedom from care
<i>A</i> <sup>2</sup>	12–14	Praise of Sirmio and requests to it and the lake to share C.'s pleasure

## LEARNING

Another Alexandrian literary catchphrase – the one which is nowadays thought to be most characteristic of the movement – was learning. Catullus in his first poem also claimed this virtue for his work. It used to be thought that this Catullan learning was shown in his longer poems rather than in his short lyrics. But in fact his short lyrics are just as learned in every way as the longer poems.

The learning of poem 31 is seen first in Catullus' choice of Sirmio as its addressee. Sirmio is a small peninsula in the northern Italian Lake Garda. To our knowledge no previous writer had given Sirmio literary or any other kind of fame. It was Catullus who first decided to dignify his unknown Italian home with a literary accolade. In doing so he is in the great tradition of Alexandrian learning. Alexandrian poets did sometimes write about hackneyed myths and places, although always in an original manner. But, as Catullus does here, they often treated unusual or even seemingly insignificant subjects untouched by previous literature (compare Horace on *his* local territory, below, p. 123). This is part of what the greatest of Alexandrian poets, Callimachus, meant when he described how Apollo, in metaphorical language, gave him the following advice about writing poetry:

I also tell you this: walk a path  
untrodden by chariots; do not drive your carriage

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on the common prints of others, or on a wide road,  
but on unworn ways, though your track be narrower.

*Aetia* fr. 1. 25–8 Pfeiffer

The format of Catullus' description of Sirmio further demonstrates his learning. He gives Sirmio encomiastic treatment of a kind familiar to us not only from Alexandrian but also from earlier Greek literature. The eulogistic method is to dignify the unusual and previously unsung deity or hero or place or whatever in two ways: by association with more celebrated deities, heroes, places; and by employing formulaic language of a kind usually employed in association with important deities etc.<sup>7</sup> Catullus says that Sirmio is the gem of all the peninsulas and islands in all the lakes and seas under Neptune's control (1–3). The little lake of Garda is thus associated with the awe-inspiring concept of the three divisions of the universe, under its tutelary deity, the great god Neptune, brother of Jupiter and Pluto. This encomiastic formula strengthens the praise of Sirmio in another way too: it is one familiarly used of great themes for praise – a sweeping favourable comparison of the object lauded with all other things of the same type. It takes the form: 'best of (all) the . . . s in the . . .'. We may compare for example:

πάντων ἄριστον ἄνδρα τῶν ἐπὶ χθονί

*the best man of all men in the world*

Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 811

optima caelicolum Saturnia magna dearum.

Ennius, *Annales* 491 Vahlen

A use of this formula somewhat similar to Catullus' use can be found, interestingly enough, in Callimachus:

. . . surely all

the Cyclades, most sacred of islands that lie in the sea,  
are worthy of song . . .

*Hymn* 4. 2–4

Two further touches in lines 1–3 reveal the flavour of scholarship sought after by Alexandrian poets like Catullus. The extended reference to all the lakes and seas in the world is reminiscent of the encyclopaedic prose works which Greek Alexandrian scholar-poets composed. In particular Callimachus' work, 'On the Rivers of the World', a different but related study, comes to mind (fr. 457–9 Pfeiffer). Such prose catalogues provided raw material for Alexandrian poetry. The 'On the Rivers' is reflected in Callimachus' *Hymn to Zeus* (lines 16ff.); and a similar interest in islands can be detected in Callimachus' *Hymn to*

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*Delos* (lines 13ff., 48ff., 153ff.). The second touch of scholarship in lines 1–3 is the phrase *uterque Neptunus*. Alexandrian poets were deeply concerned with local cults and with the odd characteristics which deities were given in different localities. Mythographers sometimes spoke as though the various attributes meant that there was not one god with a particular name but several. The end result can be seen for example in Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 3. 53–9 and in Clement of Alexandria, *Protreptikos* 24P with their lists of ‘three Jupiters and several Vulcans’ and so on.

This interest is connected not only with antiquarianism but with religious syncretism and philosophic scepticism about the more literal side of polytheism. In Greek Alexandrian literature however it is the antiquarian interest which predominates, along with the passion for obscure cult-practices and local history. We can see this from a fragment of Callimachus:

The Aphrodites – for the goddess is not one –  
are excelled in wisdom by Aphrodite of Castnion,  
all of them . . .  
for she alone allows the sacrifice of swine.

Callimachus, *Iambi* 10. 1–4 Pfeiffer

In Catullus the concept of ‘two Neptunes’ is just literary ornament, possibly with a humorous overtone (see below, p. 17). But it sets him firmly in the Alexandrian tradition.

Lines 5–6 contain a varied and precise reference to the Thuni and Bithuni, the two tribes inhabiting Bithynia. Ancient poets, including Alexandrian poets, were usually, by our criteria, very ignorant of geography and tend to confuse and misplace localities. But Alexandrian poets tried to give the impression of having accurate and detailed geographical and ethnographical information; and in his reference to the Thuni and Bithuni Catullus is following in their footsteps. He has recently been in the area himself and so has precise knowledge which he can, in Alexandrian fashion, show off to his literary friends back home. There is also some kind of word-play here: Bithuni with its prefix *bi* brings to mind the notion ‘second Thuni’. Part of the intention of this word-play may be etymological to show how the Bithuni came to have this name. Etymology, much of it inaccurate, was a favourite occupation of Alexandrian poets, although it is also found in earlier Greek poetry. Another jocular etymological word-play may possibly occur in the final section of Catullus 31. Catullus describes Lake Garda’s waves as ‘Lydian’ (line 13). He may be hinting that *Lydius* is connected with