

**THE TRANSLATION
OF CATULLUS' CARMEN 101**

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INTRODUCTION

Poem number one hundred and one by the Roman poet Gaius Valerius Catullus is an intimate glimpse into a side of Catullus that is easy to overlook. Unlike the mass of his work which demonstrates his introspective obsession with Lesbia or his biting and sarcastic stabs at those who have earned his scorn, this work portrays his tender affection for a brother who has died. From the companion piece of this work, poem sixty-five we learn of the death of Catullus' brother. Professor G. P. Goold, of Yale University in a 1983 translation of poem sixty-five gives us a touching introduction to this relationship. Catullus declares:

...I am worn out by enduring grief...the death-pale foot of my brother, on whom torn from my sight the soil of Troy lies beneath the Rhoeteian shore – shall I never hereafter be able to hear your voice, shall I never hereafter set eyes on you, brother dearer than life? But have no doubt I shall always love you, always be singing songs saddened by your death. (Goold, pg. 165).

From these words we can determine that his brother had died in the area of Northwestern Asia minor where the ancient city of Troy once stood. Poem one hundred and one pictures Catullus at the tomb bringing death offerings and mourning. The late Professor C. J. Fordyce of the University of Glasgow in his commentary on this piece suggests that the occasion for this visit occurred in 57 B.C. during his expedition to Bithynia with Memmius (Fordyce, pg. 388). In this brief study we will analyze some key issues related to the translation of this piece and consider some different approaches to its translation.

THE TEXT

Let us begin with a look at the text itself (taken from Professor Kenneth Quinn's edition) along with my own very simple translation:

Multas per gentes et multa per aequora uectus		Through many nations and over many seas having been
aduenio has miseras, frater, ad inferias,		driven I come, poor brother, to (these) offerings,
ut te postremo donarem munere mortis		that I might give (them) at last for the service of the dead
et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem.		and I, in vain address ashes, unable to speak.
quandoquidem fortuna mihi tete abstulit ipsum,	5	Since fortune has carried away your own self,
heu miser indigne frater adempte mihi,		Alas, poor brother undeservingly taken away from me,
nunc tamen interea haec, prisco quae more parentum		now however, not withstanding these things, by the ancient
tradita sunt tristi munere ad inferias,		custom of (our) parents
accipe fraterno multum manantia fletu,		(these) offerings are handed over with sad service
atque in perpetuum, frater, aue atque uale.	10	Take them with much wetness from fraternal weeping
		and for ever, brother, farewell and farewell.

We notice first the word *inferias* in line two and line eight. This is a standard word used for the offerings brought to the grave of the one who has died. In Virgil's *Aeneid* such offerings are described as in involving wine, milk and the blood of animals that have been sacrificed (Rhoades, pg. 189). Professor Fordyce suggests that milk, wine, honey and flowers were the traditional offerings made to *di manes*, the spirits of the departed. (Fordyce, 388). This is both a ritual and actual offerings themselves. Thus some translations will render this "funeral rites" (Goold, pg. 213), or simply "rites" (Brittain, pg. 9, Clucas, pg. 43). Two versions will uses the rather obscure word "obsequies" (Myers, pg. 165, Cornish pg. 163) which refers to "funeral rites." The use of an obscure word to translate what (for the Romans) was a common ritual and offering leaves the text awkward.

In line four Catullus refers to *mutam...cinerem* "ashes unable to speak." Obviously this indicates that Catullus brother was burned rather than buried, and Catullus is addressing the urn in which one would expect to find the bones and ashes of his brother. According to William Smith in

his monumental *Dictionary of Greek & Roman Antiquities* the Romans had originally buried their dead but by the time of the late republic they had borrowed from the Greeks the practice of burning the deceased on a funeral pyre. After this the ashes and bones were placed in an urn and set in what was called a *columbarium*. (Smith, pg. 559, 561). Here is an example in which we see the importance of understanding the historical settings of classical literature. We must not picture Catullus standing in a modern cemetery addressing a headstone,

nor even a modern mausoleum with the cremation urn concealed behind a name plate. Examples of *columbarium* such as have been uncovered at Pompeii reveal that these were rooms with little niches in which the urn (or urns) would set. We can see this in **Figure**

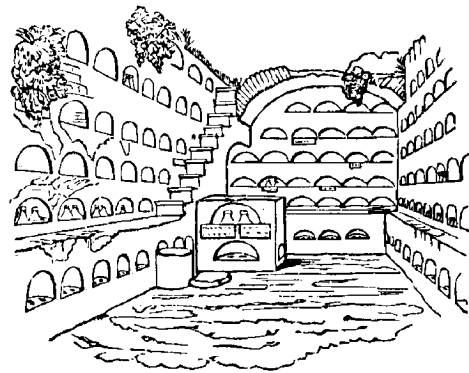


Figure One

One, borrowed from Smith which shows a *columbarium*

from the villa Rufini in Rome. Excavations have found some urns to contain bone and ash with wine and oil poured upon them. (Adam, *Roman Antiquities*, pg. 420). This is undoubtedly the *inferiae* mentioned above. So Catullus has come to pour these offerings on his brother's ashes and bones.

Most of the translations will help us to envision this practice to a degree by translating this literally "ashes" (Brittain, Clucas, Cornish, Goold, Myers). One 1912 translation by H. W. Garrod contained in Michael Grant's *Latin Literature: An Anthology* has two ideas which are altogether misleading. First he inserts the phrase "I only ask to grace thy *bier*" (emphasis mine). A bier is a framework for carrying a corpse to a grave or a coffin. Second, rather than rendering this literally

“ashes” he writes “idly communing with *dust*.” Although these may be poetic phrases in their own right they lead the reader to imagine a modern burial site rather than a *columbarium*.

Line seven refers to *prisco more parentum* “the ancient custom of the parents.” Much like the *inferiae* the Romans referred to certain funeral rites as the *parentalia*. In Latin the verb *parento* meant “I. to celebrate the *parentalia* in honor of the dead, II. to bring an offering to the dead...” (*Cassell’s Latin-English Dictionary*, pg. 392). In book six, line 223 of the *Aeneid* Virgil will use the same expression - *more parentum*. Our translations here will vary a great deal. Cornish renders this “the custom of our fathers.” Myers and Ormsby have “our fathers’ customs.” Goold translates it “ancient custom.” Brittain and Clucas choose “ancestral custom.”

In line nine we observe the phrase *fraterno multum manantia fletu* “much wetness from fraternal weeping.” It is most likely that Catullus here is using this phrase to express his extreme sadness over the loss of his brother, and speaking in a figurative sense. Professor Fordyce in commenting on this phrase claims “the exaggeration is common in Latin poetry.” (Fordyce, pg. 390). There is however an interesting custom related to tears which may relate in a more literal sense. Alexander Adam in his *Roman Antiquities: An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Romans*, claims “sometimes a small glass vial full of tears, called by moderns a *lachrymatory*, was put in the urn.” (Adam, 419). Was Catullus placing such an offering inside his brother’s urn? Probably not. Would he have been aware of this custom in choosing his words? It seems likely. None of the translations take this to refer to such a custom. We find the phrases “wet with a brother’s tears” (Clucas), “much bedewed...” (Brittain), “moistened with a brother’s many tears” (Goold), “wet with my tears” (Myers), “wet with many a tear of a brother” (Cornish), “dewy with

a brothers tears” (Lang) and finally “a brother’s tears, bedewed with sorrow” (Garrod).

The final textual issue we will explore is found in the last line in the phrase *in perpetuum...ave atque vale* “farewell for ever and farewell.” Kenneth Quinn in his commentary on this line suggests that “the words *ave atque vale* possibly formed part of the traditional ceremony.” (Quinn, pg. 442). In book three, lines 67-68 Virgil’s *Aeneid* we seem to find some evidence for this. The text reads “We offer, and lay the spirit in the tomb, and with loud voices raise the farewell cry.” (Rhoades, pg. 149). Adam concurs with this conclusion suggesting that these were part of the *verba novissima* - “last words” which were said when the remains of the deceased were placed in the *columbarium*. (Adam, 419). If Catullus was unable to be present when his brother was originally interred it seems reasonable to assume that upon leaving the *columbarium* for the first time himself he would declare what would have been said at his funerary ceremony. Most of the translations rather than repeating the word “farewell” twice, render *ave* “hail” (Brittain, Clucas, Cornish, Goold, Myers).

EVALUATION OF THE TRANSLATIONS

In the world of biblical translation various words are employed to classify various approaches to translation. Words such as “literal” or “loose” will suggest that the editors either felt the necessity to limit their vocabulary to only what was necessary to express the actual meaning of the text or whether they felt at liberty to expand (or eliminate) vocabulary to communicate the “sense” of the work. Both approaches have their problems. A strictly literal approach may leave readers on their own trying to wade through unfamiliar idioms and historical details with which they are unfamiliar. On the other hand a looser approach may express the feeling of the text (thus it is sometimes called a “dynamic” approach) but either leave the reader ignorant of the historical con-

text of the work, or actually lead to misinterpretations due to modern preconceptions.

Perhaps as a result of my study of biblical literature, or because it seems to me that this generation (in general) has a very narrow understanding of the world and culture which has preceded us, I believe the best approach to translation is to be as literal as possible, supplying historical explanations outside of the text. Of the translations of Catullus which we have utilized above some quick and simple classifications can be made of at least three of these. The translations of Garrod Lang and Myers & Ormsby (printed in full in the appendix) are very loose in some instances and outright alterations in others. Beginning with Garrod, we have already seen the liberty which he took adding the concepts of the *bier and dust*, let us consider some other examples of the same tendency. In the first line the phrase “over the world’s mighty highway” is very picturesque but these are not the words of Catullus. In his line thirteen, I suppose he is referring back to Catullus’ reference in line four to his address being *nequiquam* “in vain,” yet in my judgment he takes it too far in inserting the words “yet think not wholly vain today.” These words are not only absent from the original but they make it sound as if Catullus originally thought his efforts were in vain upon coming to his brother’s tomb but then realizes that the offerings have meaning. It seems to me all that he ever questioned as fruitless was speaking to *mutam cinerem* “mute ashes.”

The slightly more literal translation of Myers and Ormsby (in other poems as well as this one) tends to seek any opportunity it finds to sensualize the subject. In their lines six and seven the phrases “two know why fortune separated two, joined by their love together” exemplify this. Certainly there is emotion and affection which this poem demonstrates, but their rendering almost makes it sound as if he were speaking of the death of Lesbia.

The translation of Lang, like Garrod is poetic and graceful, but it seems to me that by taking the liberty of supplying words (and actual concepts) which are not in the original he deceives the reader. The phrase “Hades’ gloom” in his line four and then “the shades below” in his line eight certainly are Roman concepts: Hades is the land of the dead, and “the shades” is a Roman idiom for spirits. The problem is neither of these concepts are even suggested in the Latin, Catullus (except for the fact that he addresses his brother) approaches this visit to the tomb from a materialistic point of view, there are no references to Hades or spirits.

The remaining translations (Brittain, Clucas, Cornish, Goold) are much more literal and in general pose fewer problems in my judgment. Brittain and Cornish (especially) are a bit more awkward and stilted. Their use of the obscure words “obsequies,” as mentioned above makes interpretation of this more difficult than it needs to be. Cornish also uses the word “querdon” in his line three which is not even found in smaller dictionaries. In all fairness, the Cornish text was originally copyrighted in 1912. A great deal has changed about our language during that time. My favorite translation, and the one which I feel remains true to the text while maintaining fluidity is Goold. Phrases such as “unanswering ashes” and “cruelly stolen from me” bring out an intensity without compromising the original text. When any translation can accomplish this it has merit.

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APPENDIX

At his Brother's Grave

BORNE through many peoples and over many seas, I come, my brother, to these sad rites, to perform the last obsequies and speak in vain to your silent ashes; for fate has snatched thee, even thee, away from me. Alas! my brother, so cruelly torn from me, accept at least these funeral gifts, much bedewed with a brother's tears, which, by ancestral custom, have been laid here as offerings to the dead; and for ever, brother, hail and farewell.

Fredrick Brittain, *The Penguin Book of Latin Verse*, (1962).

CI

WANDERING through many countries and over many seas I come, my brother, to these sorrowful obsequies, to present you with the last guerdon of death, and speak, though in vain, to your silent ashes, since fortune has taken your own self away from me—alas, my brother, so cruelly torn from me! Yet now meanwhile take these offerings, which by the custom of our fathers have been handed down—a sorrowful tribute—for a funeral sacrifice; take them, wet with many tears of a brother, and for ever, O my brother, hail and farewell!

Cornish, F. W., Cornish, *Catullus, Tibullus and Pervigilium Veneris*, (1962 original copyright 1913).

CI. Multas per gentes

Translated by Andrew Lang

From wandering through the nations, o'er the waves,
 Brother, I come, and stand beside thy tomb
 To give thee the death-offering of the grave,
 To call thee, vainly, dumb in Hades' gloom.
 Oh, weary is the fortune that bereft me,
 I give or gave our fathers long ago
 The sad fraternal duty that is left me,
 The dreary gifts unto the shades below.
 Accept them, dewy with a brother's tears;
 Accept the sorrow that they cannot tell,
 And through the long eternity of years,
 Brother, farewell, for ever fare thee well!

Basil Davenport, *The Portable Roman Reader*, (1951).

AT A BROTHER'S GRAVE

Over the mighty world's highway,
 City by city, sea by sea,
 Brother, thy brother comes to pay
 Pitiful offerings unto thee.

I only ask to grace thy bier
 With gifts that only give farewell,
 To tell to ears that cannot hear
 The things that it is vain to tell,

And, idly communing with dust,
 To know thy presence still denied,
 And ever mourn forever lost
 A soul that never should have died.

Yet think not wholly vain today
 This fashion that our fathers gave
 That hither brings me, here to lay
 Some gift of sorrow on thy grave.

Take, brother, gifts a brother's tears
 Bedewed with sorrow as they fell,
 And 'Greeting' to the end of years,
 And to the end of years 'Farewell'.

H. W. GARROD (1912)

Michael Grant, *Latin Literature: An Anthology*, (1978).

CI

Journeying over many countries,
 Many seas, I've come, my brother,
 To perform this last, sad rite,
 A final gift for the dead. I speak
 Vainly, to silent ashes; fortune
 Has taken away your real self -
 Cruelly snatched away, my brother.
 Accept these offerings - my own
 Sad tributes, ancestral customs -
 As a funeral sacrifice.
 Take them, wet with a brother's tears,
 And oh my brother, hail and farewell, for ever.

Humphrey Clucas,
Versions of Catullus, (1985).

At his brother's grave

After travel over many a land and over many a sea
I have come, brother, for these sad funeral rites,
to present you with death's last tribute
and speak to your unanswering ashes, though speak in vain,
seeing that fate has robbed me of your living self,
alas, poor brother, so cruelly stolen from me.
But now, naught else availing, take these gifts, which
ancient custom prescribes, a forlorn tribute to the dead;
take them moistened with a brother's many tears,
and for all time, brother, hail and farewell!

G. P. Goold, G. P., *Catullus*, (1983).

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Through many peoples, over many seas,
I come dear brother, for these obsequies:
I set these gifts beside your grave and speak
To silent ashes. Sadly now I seek
To know why fortune separated two
Joined by their love together, taking you.
And as our fathers' customs bid us bring
The dead their due, accept this offering,
Wet with my tears which, more than words can, tell
My brother hail, forever hail, farewell.

Reney Myers & Robert Ormsby,
*Catullus: The Complete Poems
for American Readers*, (1970).