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# Attis at Large

CATULLUS

(Translated by Anna Jackson)

And so Attis, seasick, heart sore, having left so terribly fast,  
with a pause, a leap, a landing, galliambically arrived  
in the shady regions, wood-clothed, in the goddessy depths of dark  
in a rage, a grief, a wild mood, having come so terribly far,  
and himself, still him, he tore off, with a flint, all his manly parts—  
so that she (now she) when she saw she was all a a a *girl*,  
even while still bleeding fresh blood, a new stain on that shagpile earth,  
in a flash, a leap, with no pause, she took up here a tambourine—  
tambourine of yours, your symbol, sign of Cybele's syllables—  
with a clash, a strike, a ringing, her soft fingers on the stretched skin,  
she began to sing this whole song, in a tremble to, to the *throng*:

All of us, not cis, but sisters—with a leap of nothing but *faith*  
let's take off, let's rush, let's stampede, like a herd on the, the, the loose—  
you are lost, you're all in exile, with a past you have left behind  
you have only me, your one hope, here to lead, if you'll follow me,  
after all that we have been through, salty seas of masculinity  
we will sail no more, no, not we—let us now be all spiritual,  
that's to say, let's sing, and sing loud, with a clash of the tambourine  
and with tossing heads and wild leaps, we must *throw* ourselves into this,  
as if in to fire, with no fear—a religious sort of a pounce!

And in need of no persuading, the stampede, if it was that, starts—  
all of them, not cis, but sisters, taking off with a lightness of heart  
like a sisterhood, a herd loosed, with a clash of the tambourine.

And so Attis, no true woman, was swept along with the rest,  
in the lead, but led, herself led, the clash of the tambourine  
a resounding beat in her head, fa-la-LA, la la la LA,  
like a heifer still unbroken, a disorder of flailing flight.

And the sisterhood, a herd loose, kept the beat of the tambourine.

And the sisters, having found peace, could all sleep when the ringing ceased,  
having come so far, so hard won, they were restless no more but at peace,  
after all that they had been through, having come so terribly far.

Yes but when the sun with eyes bright looked out at the whole airy sky,  
 and the whole expanse of hard earth, and the whole wilderness of sea,  
 yes and when the sunlight drove forth all the shadows of the long night,  
 and when sleep itself was sent off, or took flight, as Attis awoke,  
 well then sleep, not Attis, found rest; it was sleep that would rest at last.  
 Not so Attis: sleep departed, and his madness departed too;  
 not so Attis, who reviewed all he had done, and all in his heart,  
 and could see the lie it had been, and see all that the lie had cost,  
 and with surging mind and heart sore made return to shallowing shore.  
 And there Attis, seasick, heart sore, with sore eyes salty as the sea  
 now addressed her country, grief struck, with this song, or more of a speech:

Oh my country, nation, homeland, oh my country where I was born!  
 Like a truant out of bounds—bounds like a palace, a place of peace—  
 in a rage, a grief, a wild mood, did I take myself off to *here*,  
 here to live in lairs of wild beasts, here to live in shivering snow,  
 to inhabit my own madness, my insanity the worst lair  
 of them all. Oh where can I now understand my country to be?  
 My sore eyes both long to be fixed in a gaze shiverless on you,  
 for a pause, a space, to come clear, and to clear what's left of my mind.  
 Do I have to leave, to have left, my own home, and live in the wild?  
 Do I have to give up male friends (though in fact he thought of his girl—  
 that is, *hers*—not his, but *her girl*), give up wrestling, forum and gym?  
 I am overlaid with such grief, my complaints just echo complaints . . .  
 For what kind of human figure can there be that I have not tried?  
 I have been a girl, a young man, adolescent and all of that,  
 as a boy I was the best, first of my class, of them all the best,  
 there were crowds in doorways, throngs, hoards at the threshold, a  
 press of heat,  
 and my house was crowded, decked out, with the garlands left in the wake  
 when I came to leave the hot sheets of my bed with the rising sun.  
 And should *I* be spoken now as—as a slave of the tambourine,  
 as a Maened, Cybele's slave girl, just a part—and a sterile part—  
 of myself? And should I live (haunt) this terrain clothed only in snow?  
 Should I spend my life in deep shade, at the base of this mountain  
 range,  
 with the deer who hide in these woods, with the boar roaming all about?  
 I regret what I have done, now, what I *wish* now I hadn't done!

When these sounds were driven forth, forced from the lips, from those  
girlish lips

and were carried back in full force to the goddess's doubled ears  
then at once she loosened from all their restraints her two shackled lions,  
with a prod, set off the left lion, the most wild and solitary:

Off you go, she cried, my fierce beast! Go and drive him into despair,  
with a leap, a pounce, a wild chase, make him flee back in to the woods:  
once a taste is taken there is no escape from my sovereignty.

With your tail as whip scourge yourself into madness and madderness,  
with a roar let loose from your depths make the whole of the world resound,  
with a tossing mane, a wild shake, go and throw yourself into this.

And these words let loose the remains of this song, the most real of all  
as the lion its own self itself incited into a rage

and tore off, all speed and tumult, with a crash through the underbrush,  
till it came to where the sea foamed, last confectionary of the shore,  
and saw Attis gazing out past the entablature of the sea,  
and it made its charge. And Attis turned and fled back in to the woods  
where she lived, in thrall, without cease, to Cybele the rest of her life.

As for we who stand astonished at this goddess as proto-punk,  
as for we for whom, since our births, life consistently disappoints,  
we can read, inspired or assailed, this song made by one driven mad.

## ATTIS AT LARGE:

## NOTES ON A TRANSLATION OF CATULLUS 63

THERE IS A LOT that is untranslatable about this poem about translation—this poem about the translation of distance into madness, a man into a girl, a girl into a man, madness into distance once again, a distance that comes to count as home, or at least resolution. It is hardly a poem for our time, with its bitter and twisted take on a man's unmaning of himself. It could surely hardly have been a poem for its own time, either, with its bitter and twisted take on religious dedication, when there were in fact *Galli*—castrati dedicated to the Goddess Cybele—living in Rome. Indeed, Cybele's temple was on the Palatine hill, where Clodia Metelli, Catullus's lover, lived, and once a year at the Megalesia Cybele was celebrated as a Roman divinity. (She was said to have been brought to Rome by one of Clodia's ancestors.) It is a most Roman and a most un-Roman poem, by a most Roman and un-Roman poet. One of the most Hellenistic of the Catullus poems, some scholars have supposed it must be a translation of a lost Greek original. A Hellenophile who again and again experimented with Greek metres, Catullus himself was an outsider to Rome, coming from Cisalpine Gaul, another way of being Gallic.

Clearly this is a poem that will retain its foreignness however it is translated. But if all translation looks to find equivalences not only in terms of language but in terms of concepts, how far is it right to go in looking for contemporary equivalences for historically specific concepts of gender translation? I like the resonances—cultural and aural—of a translation of the Gallae as “not cis, but sisters,” in lines like, “All of us, not cis, but sisters—with a leap of nothing but *faith*.” At the same time, these lines discomfort me, with the translation of so foreign a concept of the Gallae into such a contemporary rendition of transgender identity. A better phrasing might be, “All of us, self-made as sisters.” But now the tambourine sound is lost, and where the stresses fall is

less obvious, too. In any case, this is going to remain a poem, and therefore a translation, that troubles and provokes. Perhaps it is a poem that should be left alone for now, as much of Catullus was left alone last century. Yet the poem itself is so self-troubled, so ambiguous, so outrageous, so strange and so estranging, it may resonate unpredictably now more than ever.

It is impossible, too, to translate a Latin metre into English, given that our metres are arranged around stress patterns, not quantitative patterns of long and short syllables. The effects are always going to be quite different. Perhaps to recreate what the effect of the galliambic metre must have been, it would work best to make up a new artificial metre with strange emphases and rhymes, like some of the verse experiments of Edith Sitwell. Instead I have gone for a simple substitution of an English stress-based equivalent for the Latin metre, with each line keeping as close as possible to this pattern:  $\sim\sim - \sim - \sim - - - // \sim\sim - \sim\sim\sim\sim \times$ . The first half gives a rather lovely metre in English. Peter Green suggests that this should be thought of as two metrical feet:  $\sim\sim - \sim$  followed by  $- \sim - -$ . This gives, for example, a phrase such as “like a heifer still unbroken” (line 33); or, with a comma even in the right place, “And the sisters, having found peace” (line 35). J. T. Kirby’s account of the metre in terms of triple time, however, with both halves of the galliambic line beginning with an upbeat, better fits how the opening of my translation can be heard. To my ear, the patterning of the phrase “with a pause, a leap, a landing” is very lovely, and offered me a very poetic-sounding rhythm that can also be heard in more conversational phrases with the same patterning of unstressed and stressed syllables. By returning to versions of this phrase and other very metrical sounding phrases, I hope to make the use of metre remain audible throughout the poem.

The second half of the galliambic line presents a different kind of challenge. In Latin, it was clearly possible to line up four or five short vowel sounds in a row, though perhaps always something of a tour de force, but is it possible to

write a line of English poetry with four unstressed syllables in a row? In practice, it is almost impossible not to place some sort of stress within those four unstressed syllables and the challenge is to keep them from being stronger than the third stressed syllable and the final syllable of the line. Even so, I have discovered that in conversational, spoken English, a pattern of four unstressed syllables is more common than I would have thought. There are phrases that can hardly be said any other way: “an unfavourable review,” for instance. When I started listening, I heard more and more: “she consistently disappoints,” “a disturbing scene of assault,” “sees the artist as proto-punk.” Some of these I imported into the poem. Curiously, the lesser-stressed syllables—the “pro” of “proto-punk,” the “scene” in the assault phrase—which in the spoken English that I heard really weren’t stressed at all—are more apparent on the page, or within a line of poetry. In any case, whether because of these inevitable additional stresses, or because of the conversational way in which some of these lines have to be read, the difficulty of replicating the metre paradoxically makes the second half of each line read less metrically, less poetically, than the first half. But the overall balance this gives this translation of the poem, between the rhythmic and the conversational, the poetic and the contemporary, fits with my aim for the work as a whole.

I have tried to keep reasonably close to the sense of the Latin. I worked with the Perseus on-line text with its links to the word study tool, and referred also to S. J. Harrison’s brilliant, literal translation (*Mnemosyne*, vol 57, Fasc 5, 2004). I have retained the shift from feminine pronouns (and forms of words) in most of the poem to masculine pronouns (and forms) at lines 42, 45, 51, 78, 80, 88 and 89 in the manuscript, which may or may not have been a transcription error, allowing the shift to add to the complexity and confusion of a poem *about* complexity and confusion. I confess my first few lines play a little loosely with the sense while I set up my way of hearing the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables

in the metre. I've also reworked the final three-line coda to the poem, and I have inserted a completely invented line about a girlfriend across the end of line 59 and the start of line 60. I must have been thinking of a poem in my own collection *I, Clodia*, in which the speaker is whirled up in the maelstrom of the poet's galliambics, something which, after all, can happen to any of us.