

Callimachus

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‘I’m writing versions of Callimachus’s epigrams’ sounds like ‘I’ve got rabies’ to judge by the way people react. I think people know Callimachus in one of three ways: a) not at all; b) inadvertently, via William Johnson Cory’s translation of epigram 2, ‘They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead...’; c) because they are classicists, although he is not hard-wired into the syllabus.

He preached the gospel of *Reader’s Digest* – cutting improves. Posterity misinterpreted this, and most of his works are lost or fragmentary; the Fourth Crusade was devastating for what had remained until then. He advised writers to take the road less travelled by, and to avoid sloppy pastiche of the epic (but this is not to diss Homer). Where the bee sucks (at the pure holy source), there suck I; the Euphrates carries trash. Also attributed to him is ‘mega book, mega cock-up – mega bibilíon, mega kakon; μέγα βιβλίον, μέγα κακόν.’

Like many of his readers, I encountered him first via the Romans, loitering in footnotes. He occupies a good deal of Catullus’s negative space – the vital bits you look for when drawing – and influenced Virgil, Horace, Ovid and Propertius (who called himself ‘Callimachus Romanus’). He was colonised, translated into Latin in a different time, place and political set-up from his own.

He himself did PR, as a Hellenistic poet-librarian can, for the colonisers who were his employers, the second and possibly third Ptolemy. Their dynasty founded by one of Alexander the Great’s Mycenaeans generals, they declined to interbreed with the Egyptians they ruled, and needed to establish validity. One means of doing this was his long poem relating to customs and phenomena, *Aetia* (reasons, causes, justifications, origin stories, kingsplaining): Greek myth supplying context and continuity.

The Romans (who had more of his material than we do) favoured this poem, as well as his epigrams which come as an uncorseted relief after his fanned-out peacock’s tail of intense learning – but in those longer works he was window-dressing for the elite, or for his scholarly émigré self in the Library of Alexandria at the western intellectual epicentre. Even one of his publicists has had enough: ‘The hymns are very learned and artificial in style; the epigrams are good.’ (At the time of writing this was on the Loeb website.)

The epigrams *are* good: confessional, amatory, admonitory, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral in a coffee spoon; the dead comment or complain through their grave markers; yearning for the caddish, beautiful boy is ungratified (you feel that Callimachus wasn’t hot, unlike Catullus). Dedications are inscribed on votive offerings, some from women begging to survive childbirth, and I voice those through a jaded auctioneer cataloguing a sale of what he unkindly calls temple tat.

Of course I’m scared of this very old material (the outer limits of his dates are about 310–235 B.C.). But a lot of auctioneers caution against wearing protective white gloves, especially when dealing with paper, because of a potential loss of dexterity. I prefer direct handling.

Returning to Cory's epigram 2, the last line-break is

...ὁ πάντων

ἄρπακτῆς Αἰδης...

– 'the all/robbing Hades'.

Cory has '... awake; / For Death, he taketh all away', but as he is a Victorian in the business of rhyming I don't object. I have 'the asset / Stripper Hades', with its whiff of the secret world of private equity, and maybe of the way City boys choose to entertain themselves after a deal, in a basement which is private for now. Translation is a treacherous transaction: there is profit and loss.