

Research at its Best

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We who are interested in a civilization which was at its peak some two thousand years ago frequently transfer ourselves into the past, leaving behind us jet planes and mushroom clouds, Sputnik and Echo. Since we have acquired the ability to place ourselves out of context in time, let us for just a few minutes move in the other direction and set ourselves down in the middle of the Fortieth Century, A.D.

By this time, civilization as we know it has disappeared. The inhabitants of earth are strange creatures whose home is the universe; and they are now looking for ways to extend their control to other universes. But, as always, not everybody is concerned with the same interests. Just as the Romans talked much about Troy and Aeneas, and just as we searched for relics of the Inca Indians and the missing link, so some of these new creatures are interested in studying the traces of a civilization that tradition says existed two thousand years before their time. Almost all evidence of it is gone. Reconstructing a building from it would be harder than reconstructing a dinosaur, for nuclear fission did not leave much intact, even in small pieces.

But through some miracle a book has survived. Granted, it is not in very good condition, but it is guarded very carefully since it is the only surviving written record from this ancient civilization. Examining it, I find that it is a *National Poetry*, an annual publication in my day, containing some poems written by teachers and college professors. This, I remember, was not considered even fairly good literature in the days when it was produced. But as the "only" example of American poetry, it has become extremely valuable.

Naturally, these Fortieth Century creatures have had great difficulty translating this book, since the English language is as obsolete as the Carthaginian; but several educators have devoted their lifetime to interpreting this strange form of communication. Today one of the foremost scholars is presenting an analysis of the poem in it called "Catullus 3." I happen to know about that poem, because I wrote it, 'way back in 1960. It was my English paraphrase of a poem by the Roman poet Catullus on the death of Lesbia's sparrow. But, of course, the name Catullus means nothing to a scholar who never heard of Latin, and he has spent sixteen months and ten days trying to analyze this title. At last he has come up with what he considers the definitive interpretation.

Catullus is obviously a proper name. I don't know why this is so obvious, but anything you take for granted is always called obvious. Perhaps our scholar takes it for a proper name because the word appears only in the title, nowhere in the poem. His study of the poem itself has revealed that the subject is something that was alive and is now dead, probably a pet of some kind. Ergo, since the subject was a pet, and Catullus is a proper name "and" the title, it seems evident that the pet's name was Catullus. The added number 3, however, posed a somewhat knotty problem. But when the scholar found a reference in another poem of this book to a King Henry VIII, it became clear that Catullus 3 could mean only one thing -- the third pet to be given this name. This man's brilliance was shown by the fact that he knew both Arabic and Roman numerals.

This piece of research had taken almost a year and a half to prepare, and it was presented in a paper which took forty-five minutes to read. But it was worth all the effort and time since it clarified a very puzzling point in a valuable book.

I glanced around at the audience. Those who were not preoccupied with giving a last-minute glance to the papers “they” were getting ready to present, seemed impressed with the ingenuity and logic of our scholar's explanation. I too was impressed. His explanation was all wrong, but somehow that just didn't seem to matter very much.