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The Untranslatability of Silence? A Voice in the Discussion on Translation of Catullus’ “Ad Inferias” by Anne Carson

Abstract

Although Catullus’ relevance may appear diminished to modern audiences, his themes of intimacy and vulnerability still find echoes in newer works, notably Anne Carson’s translation of “Ad Inferias”, included in the book *Nox*. This analysis examines the debate about the perceived untranslatability of this poem. Catullus’ oeuvre is well known for its linguistic intricacies and explicit motifs, which often pose translation hurdles. “Ad Inferias”, a traditional elegy, seems to lack such complexities and has been frequently translated. As indicated, an existential interpretation of the verse “et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem” (and that I would talk in vain to the silent ash), contextualized within Carson’s metaphysical silence concept, reframes the discussion. The article underscores the untranslatability as a primarily philosophical aspect, arising from the incommunicability of experiences centred around transcendence, death, mourning, and suffering, and presents examples of translations that maintain the emotional and thematic intensity of the piece.

Keywords: Catullus, “Ad Inferias”, Anne Carson, *Nox*, translation studies, Latin language, Latin literature

Gaius Valerius Catullus (c. 84 BC – c. 54 BC), an eminent Roman poet, is mostly remembered for his tumultuous love-and-hate relationship with a woman he named “Lesbia”. His works, oscillating between fervent declarations of love and raw expressions of betrayal, paved the way for later elegiac poets. He is also mentioned for his direct style and unfiltered verses – whether they were humorous jabs at friends or scathing remarks directed at powerful figures, they act as a window into daily life and politics of the late Roman Republic, offering readers more than just artistic value. Although his poems have endured

for millennia in the canon, Catullus may appear largely forgotten to many contemporary audiences, especially those outside the circle of classical scholars. His poetry emerges occasionally in unexpected contexts, as evidenced by a nod in the video game, *The Witcher III*, which features an excerpt from his audacious 16th poem.

A mere sporadic resurgence does not do justice to the relevance of Catullus. He was a central figure in the Neoteric circle, a group of poets influenced by the Hellenistic poets of Alexandria. Their works were a conscious departure from traditional epic narratives, pivoting instead towards introspective (as well as intellectual and nooky) themes, crystallised in precise, polished verse. The relatable quality of intimacy and vulnerability rarely influence modern literature. However, when they do, the impact is profound, as exemplified by Anne Carson's (2010) deeply personal book *Nox*. This heartfelt work, created as a tribute to her late brother Michael, pairs her English translation of Catullus's *Ad inferias* with her own meditations, photographs, letters, and personal artefacts related to her late brother. Each word of the Catullus poem is meticulously annotated and dissected, with Carson offering definitions and personal reflexions. These are interspersed with memories of her brother, capturing moments of their shared past and her journey of understanding and coming to terms with his sudden passing, presenting a profound exploration of mourning woven into the fabric of translational art. What is particularly striking is how Carson highlighted elements of *Ad inferias* that seem almost untranslatable, leading to renewed interest and discussions around Catullus's work. But to fully appreciate this discourse, it is essential to first delve into the poem itself.

Multas per gentes et multa per aequora uectus
 aduenio has miseram, frater, ad inferias,
 ut te postremo donarem munere mortis
 et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem.
 quandoquidem fortuna mihi tete abstulit ipsum,
 heu miser indigne frater adempte mihi,
 nunc tamen interea haec, prisco quae more parentum
 tradita sunt tristi munere ad inferias,
 accipe fraterno multum manantia fletu,
 atque in perpetuum, frater, aue atque uale. (Carson 2010)¹

In the Catullus composition, the typical scenario in which the departed speak to the living through a gravestone inscription is upended. Instead, it is the poet, positioned beside the burial site, who makes the final farewell. The text is more artistic and literary, as opposed to serving merely a utilitarian purpose, which is common in most epitaphs. Therefore, the poem reflects a highly personal and expressive form of communication that intimately captures the emotions and experiences of the poet. While strikingly personal, it still adheres to a particular established framework, less known today, but popular in Catullus' times: in Hellenistic and later literature, epitaphs were increasingly created for the sake of the art itself,

1 In my literal translation: "Having been carried through many peoples and many seas, / I arrive, brother, at these wretched funeral rites, / so that I might give you the last gift of death / and speak in vain to mute ash. / Since fortune has taken you yourself from me, / alas, wretched brother, undeservedly taken from me, / now nevertheless meanwhile, these things which have been handed down / by the ancient custom of ancestors for sorrowful funeral rites, / accept [them], dripping much with a brother's tears, / and forever, brother, hail and farewell".

rather than to be placed on the tomb (Hansen 1998: 328). Usually the deceased or the tomb itself speaks in them, but forms of dialogue are also present, e.g. in some of the epigrams attributed to Callimachus. For instance, in AP 7,522, the narrator comes across the tombstone of Timonoe and engages in a conversation with her, empathising with her bereaved husband, Euthymenes. It is often inferred that the narrator has not seen Euthymenes in a long time, was unaware of his wife's passing, and is now stirred by recollections of the couple's deep affection for one another. Matthew Hosty critiques this as an "unsatisfactory epitaph", as it portrays a bystander who gathers all the information he can from the tomb, but remains unsure of how to react. In result, he ends up merely echoing the conventional sentiment expressed on the gravestone (Hosty 2019). Regardless of these details, the dialogical form falls well within the scope of funerary literature, as indicated by Maureen Carroll (2008: 47). Certainly no less so than the lament over destiny's untimely claim on a loved one, the outward expression of sorrow, and the portrayal of endless separation. Modern interpretations of the song reveal an existential or sceptical undercurrent that adds a layer of complexity. In particular, the fourth verse, "et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem", diverges from the usual mournful register. It underscores the paradox of attempting to converse with the deceased, a fact noted by Piantanida (2021: 193). Rather than engaging in a dialogue with his brother's soul or his memory, Catullus addresses the silent ash that remains of him in a monologue. The complexity of the poem intensifies further when we consider that it might have been conceived as a commemorative piece intended to be recited at a funeral. Feldherr speculates that its main function might be performative (2000: 209). This notion potentially amplifies the apparent audacity or defiance embedded in this piece. Traditionally, funerary rituals require a solemn address to the deceased, yet the impossibility of achieving meaningful contact renders the entire ritual potentially hollow, as argued by Piantanida (2021: 193). Some scholars may challenge this interpretation, arguing, much like Michèle Lowrie, that the absence of the deceased does not surprise or diminish the significance of the ceremony (2009: 44), but this tonality is not uncommon in mourning poetry. An illustrative example is found in Jan Kochanowski's *Threnody*, specifically the tenth, which includes the evocative line "Gdziekolwiek jest, jeśliś jest, lituj mej żałości" (Kochanowski [1530–1584] 2009: 22), translated by Stanisław Barańczak and Seamus Heaney: "Wherever you may be – if you exist – / Take pity on my grief" (1995: 21).

From this description, one could infer that the poem does not pose clear challenges to translation. However, since Carson's publication of *Nox*, literary critics have underscored aspects of the poem that seemingly resist rendering it in any other language, particularly its profound solemnity and the tangible sense of grief woven throughout. As Sam Anderson has written, "This strikes me as the secret ambition of *Nox*, to produce a worthy translation of Catullus 101 – not merely on a line-by-line level (although Carson does include her own moving translation of the poem) but in a deeper sense. Carson wants to reproduce, over the space of an entire book, the untranslatable qualities she most admires in Catullus: the passionate, slow surface; the deep festivity buried in the sorrow. She wants to reanimate dead things spoken in a dead language" (Anderson 2010). The enigmatic nature of the poem was so widely recognised that it was often painted as a piece famously known for its alleged untranslatability within professional circles. David Biespiel, amazed by her attempts, said: "And not just any Latin into English but Catullus 101! A poem that so many translators have claimed is untranslatable. It's as if she admits that she can't translate the Catullus 101 ever and at all – but she can perform it and she can embody its translational potential and she can enact it, all by grieving for her brother" (Biespiel 2011). Carson herself echoed these sentiments in her writings, expressing her frustration and struggle to capture the essence of *Ad inferias* in

a way that would meet her satisfaction: “No one (even in Latin) can approximate Catullan diction, which at its most sorrowful has an air of deep festivity, like one of those trees that turns all its leaves over, silver, in the wind... I never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101” (Carson 2010: 7.1). Despite the passage of several years since the publication of *Nox*, she held steadfastly onto her belief about the complexity and intransigence of the poem when it came to the task of translation. This conviction was made evident in her public commentary and discussions on the subject, such as an interview in which she candidly confessed to still viewing it as one of the greatest creations in the world, yet one that stubbornly retained its aura of untranslatability (Wachtel 2014).

The claim that the poem *Ad inferias* is fundamentally untranslatable, while widely accepted, has not been without its critics and moments of scepticism. Right off the bat, some have made the seemingly straightforward argument that the poem has indeed been translated in the past, as James Guest in an ironically titled letter *It could be done*, which was a response to a Dan Chiasson review *The Unfolding Elegy*, where the critic dealt, following Carson, expressed some defeatism towards the possibility of translation (Guest 2010). Such an objection might be arguably a somewhat oversimplified response, as untranslatability more frequently denotes the existence of aporias, or irresolvable internal contradictions, that arise within the translation process, rather than an outright impossibility or renunciation of any attempts at translation. However, this counterargument should not be dismissed completely or overlooked. Instead, it should encourage us to dive deeper into the various aspects of Catullus’ poetry, its translation, and the criteria we use to deem a text untranslatable.

Beginning with Catullus directly, it is important to note that his oeuvre is often intricately woven with cultural motifs and stylistic nuances, which frequently present significant challenges for translation. Until the last decade, a significant part of the scholarly discourse focused predominantly on the distinct elements of wit and eroticism that permeate his verses, as highlighted by the studies of Godwin (2008: 93–115) and Willett (2006). Numerous works by Catullus were even deliberately excluded or censored by translators and editors throughout various historical periods². When these pieces eventually found their way into publications, they were frequently presented with cautionary notes or reservations about their translatability. These concerns emanated only from the comic and erotic components of Catullus’ output. Contrary to other, more controversial pieces, *Ad inferias* has secured a consistent presence in numerous editions. Also, while several articles have delved into the nuances of textual interpretation (Kletke 2016: 55–75) and the intricate grammar and linguistic patterns characteristic of Catullus’ works (D’Angour 2019), they have not specifically addressed his 101st poem. This suggests that this particular piece might not pose the same level of difficulty or complexity for translators as some of his more infamous works, like *Carmen XVI*, to name one. This discrepancy raises the possibility that the notion

2 The challenge of translating explicit content in literary works in the classical realm seems to be a constant dilemma. For example, in earlier times, Abraham John Valpy faced with *Carmen XVI*’s brutal, offensive and erotic verses, chose in his 1822 edition *C. Valerii Catullii Opera Omnia* a strategy of obfuscation, replacing uncensored lines with asterisks and limiting his commentary to non-descriptive phrases such as *verbum obscenum* (obscene word). This tactic evaded the need for literal translation, safeguarding the sensibilities of his readers while hinting at the controversial nature of the original content. Quite recently, Anna Świderkówna leaned towards domestication. She translated the provocative insults *pathice* and *cinaede* into less abrasive terms, rendering them as “draniu” i “gałganie” (bastard, rascal), and replaced the actions contained in the threat with completely different ones. In her commentary, Świderkówna acknowledged the harshness of the original terms, labeling them untranslatable epithets that characterized the subjects as immoral individuals (Świderkówna 2005: 20). Such description is at least inaccurate.

of untranslatability may be more closely tied to the subjective struggles faced by individual translators, rather than rooted in objective difficulties intrinsic to the text.

Delving into the genre and thematic content of *Ad inferias*, it becomes evident that the poem does not seem to present explicit hurdles in the translation process. It aligns with conventional themes, avoids linguistic traps, has literary successors who adopt similar traditions, and is adaptable, as demonstrated by Carson's rendition and the various translations that followed. Where exactly does the challenge lie? Analysing the reasons for this sudden turnaround, one can see that the problem of untranslatability indicates something different from it might at first glance appear. Considering these factors, the question arises: what, then, makes *Ad inferias* difficult to translate? To grasp the concepts underpinning this discussion, it is essential to dive deeper into Anne Carson's personal translation theory, often overlooked in conversations about *Ad inferias*. Carson elaborates on her unique perspective in her notable essay, *Variations on the Right to Remain Silent*. Within this work, she presents a concept that serves as a metaphorical bridge between two extreme ends of a spectrum, cliché, and catastrophe (Carson 2008). In the context of Carson's framework, the term cliché refers to an oversimplified or stereotyped representation of things. This portrayal makes them easier to comprehend, but at the expense of their inherent depth. It signifies a tendency to name and define phenomena in a way that erases their subtleties, reducing them to mere caricatures of their actual selves. An additional illustration of this thought can be found in Carl Gustav Jung's *Red Book*, among others: "To understand a thing is a bridge and possibility of returning to the path. But to explain a matter is arbitrary and sometimes even murder. Have you counted the murderers among the scholars?" (Jung 2009: 230). In stark contrast to this, the term catastrophe signifies the state of overwhelming chaos and perplexity that ensues when we refrain from attempting to understand or explain things. This, resulting in incomprehension, leaves the phenomenon or concept as an enigma, eluding our perception. Although this circumstance might provoke unease, Carson intriguingly sees it as possessing an underrated subversive or enlightening potential. Carson then proposes an intermediary approach: the realm of metaphysical silence, an expansive space nestled between the gaps of spoken words. Although she does not provide a precise definition of this term, one can infer that it represents a balanced amalgamation of the two extremities. It steers clear of the shallowness of clichés while simultaneously averting the chaos that catastrophe might engender. Metaphysical silence presents an opportunity for an intimate and direct engagement with the inexpressible, with that which resists easy translation into everyday language but which can be deeply felt and profoundly experienced. To clarify this concept, Carson posits the existence of a word that does not intend to be translatable, an idea that invites the phenomenon of metaphysical silence. This concept is manifested in instances like *moly*, a term from Homer's *Odyssey*, which denotes a magical plant named in the language of the gods. This word eludes exact translation into human languages, given its mystical and otherworldly origin. Another example can be found in the inner voices that guided Joan of Arc. These, laden with divine guidance and personal conviction, could not be understood or translated into the accepted conceptual framework of her interrogators. Hence, they were dismissed as heretical, with their true essence eluding capture. These examples bring the essence of metaphysical silence to light, revealing the profound untranslatability of certain experiences and concepts and their defiance of standard modes of understanding and expression.

The concept of metaphysical silence, articulated in Carson's essay, provides a valuable lens for interpreting *Ad inferias*, particularly with regard to the line "et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem". This line, both in Catullus's original poem and in Carson's *Nox*, is suffused with a profound sense of

absence, as Erik Fredericksen (2021: 299) has observed. The perceived untranslatability of *Ad inferias* would not arise from unique linguistic or cultural aspects that pose challenges in finding appropriate equivalents in other languages. Remarkably, the verse delineates a situation universally comprehensible in human experience. On a literal level, it is feasible to express this circumstance. The crux of the difficulty of translation lies in conveying the experience of transcendence, death, mourning, and suffering that the poem explores. From Carson's point of view, Catullus has effectively distilled this intense moment, resulting in a verse that strikes the reader deeply, causes them to pause and reflect, and makes it essentially impossible to render it in any other form than where it originated. But can we conclusively assert that the poem remains untranslatable?

The idea of metaphysical silence, as espoused by Carson, fits into a broader tapestry of parallel thoughts regarding the concept of ineffability, a subject that has been frequently pondered in fields as diverse as religious studies, theology, philosophy, literature, and sociology. Although it would be an unattainable task to exhaustively catalogue all instances and interpretations of this idea, even a handful of examples could serve to situate Carson's idea in a more comprehensive intellectual context. One prominent figure who has grappled with this concept is the religious scholar William James. He highlights inexpressibility as a distinctive trait of mystical experiences, a characteristic that renders them incommunicable to others. According to James, the profound nature of these moments makes them impossible to encapsulate and convey through ordinary language, essentially placing them beyond the realm of common comprehension (James 1902). The notion of ineffability is also deeply ingrained in more typical religious discourses, particularly in the strain of apophatic theology. Here, the Divine is described through negation, premised on the belief that positive descriptors are inherently inadequate to capture the infinite and incomprehensible nature of God. Therefore, the existence of God is approached in terms of what He is not, rather than what He is. The concept extends even further, permeating various religious and philosophical systems. It is often linked to the most exalted and, frequently, the most abstract, forces or phenomena within these traditions. For example, in Taoism, the principle of Dao and in Buddhism, the state of Nirvana, are both deemed ineffable; however, as Steven Katz astutely notes, the concept of ineffability in these contexts does not necessarily entail a uniform kind of experience across these traditions (Katz 1978: 48). The theme of death is another area where ineffability prominently emerges. The finality and mystery of death make it an elusive subject, one that proves resistant to full understanding or explanation (Valberg 2007: 19). This inexpressibility also extends to thinking about the afterlife. The contemplation of what lies beyond death can elicit thoughts of insurmountable boundaries, the uncertainty of what exists on the other side, and the consequent absence of communication, as depicted in the writings of Kochanowski. Furthermore, as Avril Maddrell posits, the experience of the death of another person may be inherently impossible to articulate. Grief, like mystical experiences, can be so deeply personal and profound that it defies clear articulation, remaining locked within the realm of the ineffable (Maddrell 2016: 169).

From this point of view, Carson's interpretation appears entirely plausible. However, when we venture into the realm of practical translation, the narrative of *Ad inferias* being fundamentally untranslatable, a viewpoint that has substantially shaped discussions around *Nox*, may not be entirely precise. This conclusion seems to have been derived primarily from philosophical explorations, individual conceptions of translation theory, and Carson's personal experience, rather than from broader linguistic or cultural factors. There should be no denying that the text of *Ad inferias* is indeed translatable, albeit with

varying degrees of success rendition attempts to grapple with, let alone articulate, the profound ineffability encapsulated in the original work. The translations of the poem are large in number, making it impossible to analyse or summarise all of them; however, even a cursory review of some of them could offer insight into the various strategies used to translate the problematic phrase “et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem”, some of which have proven to be remarkably effective. Through this selective examination, three primary approaches to translation emerge. The first method involves softening the original text, thereby subtly diminishing the raw emotional intensity of the source material. The second approach strives for a faithful, literal translation, aiming to maintain the structural and lexical integrity of the original as much as possible. The third and final strategy involves the infusion of emotionally charged elements within the translation, aimed at conveying the sense of ineffability. Here are some examples.

Jan Czubek chose to translate “Niemym popiołom zanieść pozdrowienie bratnie” (To bring a brotherly greeting to the silent ashes) (Czubek³ 1898: 143). This rendition foregrounds the fraternal affection and tenderness conveyed by the poet, while simultaneously diminishing the impression of unrequited contact. The word “nequiquam” (in vain) has no equivalent in his work. Andrew Lang translates the line as “To call thee, vainly, dumb in Hades’ gloom” (Davenport 1971: 268). This is a distant version of the original. The sense of an insurmountable barrier does not disappear altogether in it, but arises through transformation; this time communication is prevented by the impassable boundary between the dead and the living, Hades. The consolatory aspect lies in the explicit acknowledgement of an afterlife and the potential for a posthumous reunion with the poet’s brother. Francesco della Corte provides another interpretation with “e per parlare invano con le tue ceneri mute” (and to speak in vain with your silent ashes) (Corte [1977] 2006: 215). This would seem a faithful rendering of the original, were it not for a detail: the pronoun “tue” (your), which subtly alters the tone of the text. The harsh image of conversing with ashes and the impression of futility are somewhat softened, although still retained through the use of the adverb “invano” (in vain). This translation brings the brother and the relationship with him to the fore, suggesting that the poet is addressing the spirit rather than the corporeal remains.

Numerous translations aim at literal fidelity, and although they may not necessarily provide the most fertile ground for analysis, a few instances merit mention for illustrative purposes. Genevieve Liveley renders the line as “And to speak in vain to the silent ash: (Liveley 2020: 237), while Anna Świderkówna opts for “I z niemymi prochami nadaremnie gadam” (I talk in vain with the mute ashes) (Świderkówna 2005: 132), and Sergio Ciufegni selects “e per parlare invano con la cenere muta” (and talk in vain with the silent ash) (Ciufegni 2012: 101). All these translations are close to each other. In the case of Świderkówna, only the verb “gadam” draws attention, probably used to rhyme with the earlier verse (“dary ostatnie, śmiertelne ci składam”); one should be aware that it was not always colloquial in character – it has existed in the Polish language for centuries, thus potentially serving as a deliberate archaism. These translations, as similar as the original, possess the capacity to evoke the ineffability implicit in the source material. However, they do not introduce additional elements specifically engineered to target this aspect.

Translations in the final category adopt a markedly different approach. Giovanni Pascoli interprets the verse as “Sol parlare a’ la tua tacita cenere... a che?” (only to speak to your silent ash... to what?) (Pascoli 1913: 121). The appended question, “a che” (to what?), stands out, its significance being underscored

3 For greater readability, the names of the translators are given in this and subsequent footnotes on Catullus’ translations instead of his name.

by the subsequent pause. The text encapsulates a moment of stark realisation of the gulf between the living brother and the mortal remnants, thereby opening a space for existential questioning. Grzegorz Franczak, in what appears to be a relatively neutral translation, “i na próżno przemawiać do ciebie – popiołu niemego” (and in vain to speak to thee – the silent ash) (Franczak, Kłęczar 2013: 517), similarly creates a strong contrast between the living and the ashes, the pause reinforcing this juxtaposition. Carson aligns herself with this final group of translations, making a powerful choice in how she renders the poem and the challenging line:

“Many the peoples many the oceans I crossed –
 I arrive at these poor, brother, burials
 so I could give you the last gift owed to death
 and talk (why?) with mute ash.
 Now that Fortune tore you from me, you
 oh poor (wrongly) brother (wrongly) taken from me,
 now still anyway this – what a distant mood of parents
 handed down as the sad gift for burials –
 accept soaked with tears of a brother
 and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell.” (Carson 2010: 7.2)

Her approach is distinctive; she captures the emotional intensity of the verse and condenses it into a singular, parenthetical “why?”. This is a clear departure from the original. The solitary question stands in contrast to the surrounding text, simultaneously inviting and defying the reader’s attempts to decipher its implications. The pause that follows the question seems to underscore its significance, allowing for a moment of contemplation. Both Pascoli and Carson opt for a subtle approach, choosing not to explicitly foreground the futility inherent in the verse. Instead, they employ open-ended questions, inviting a multitude of interpretations, playing into the theme of inexpressibility inherent in the poem. It is not merely a rhetorical device: It presents the reader with an existential problem with the nature of grief, loss, and the human struggle to make sense of mortality. It is worth noting that the question arguably defies a definitive answer aligned with the ineffable quality of the original verse.

The task of capturing complex experiences in translation might be faced with scepticism, asking whether it is even plausible to encapsulate such intricacies. However, despite the looming doubts, there exist approaches that strive to attain a rendition of these. One such method necessitates the translator to exercise acute attention, a sharpened observation of what lies beneath the textual surface. They must be attuned to the metaphysical silence, the profound and unsaid notions that may be subtly embedded within the text. These are not immediately apparent, but their resonance can be felt by a discerning reader. In doing so, they managed to unleash these underlying elements and allow them to reverberate appropriately within the new context of the translated work. This might require a significant departure from a translation strategy that relies on a superficial understanding of fidelity (which often results in a softened or simplified rendition that distorts the original text). This is Carson’s approach, reflecting her consistent focus on conveying meaning through deep feelings and direct experience, rather than relying solely on linguistic representation. Her relentless effort to penetrate to the very depths of the original text, to articulate the layered experiences within it, and to share this intimate understanding with others through her translation work serves as a testament to this unique perspective.

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