

Catullus and the Lyric Voice

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***Abstract:** The Lyric Voice can be explored to show the nexus of interlocutors clamouring to be heard in Catullus' poetry, but ultimately, it is Catullus himself who frames and controls all interaction. In addressing his poems to specific people at specific times, Catullus attempts to be constantly present with the reader. He invites the reader to live the poem, to allow it to transcend the petty constraints of time and space, then elsewhere reminds the reader of the literary artifice which is innate in writing about writing. He points outside the poem, both to bring the readers into his world, but also to force them to recognise that it is fake and created. Playing with Sappho, Catullus recognises how liminal translation is, and questions the locus of the voice in that dialogue. Voice is most investigated through silence however, and Catullus explores everyone's silences; those he addresses, the readers and even his own. Ultimately though, Catullus comes out on top, these are his poems, he is never silent, and to engage with him is to have your mouth filled with his words. Just as he silences those who can speak, he breathes life into a variety of personae loquentes that litter his poem, such as his phaselus, whose epigraphic tone helps Catullus capture and freeze a moment in time. The Lyric Voice exerts immense influence over how we interact with these poems, and if we listen closely, we can appreciate the voices Catullus does and does not allow us to hear.*

Catullus' poetry is characterised both by its writing, and its voice. Yet the only voice that we can give to it is our own. It can be marked by a rejection of context and meaning and a focus on the utterance; Catullus rejoices in the culture paradox of meaning nothing, in refusing to be an authority on his own poetry. In this way Catullus draws attention to the dynamics of interlocution, what is said, by whom, to whom, when and where. It inhabits the space between writing and speech, the former of which presupposes the absence of the person being addressed, whilst the latter implies a present interlocutor. The voice obtrudes through the writing to stress the glamour of presence but without effacing it. Catullus is very conscious of the unusual space he places the reader in, skilfully creating the illusion that we are intruders to a private conversation. The drama of Catullus' poetry is found in the way he goes about "making language perform"¹; through the manipulation of presence, the implications of silence, his mastery over your use of language and through objects which he seemingly brings to life. It is the Lyric Voice which underlies these constructions, but it is the voice he chooses to give to us, and the voice of the reader is never absent from the discussion. He specifically engages the reader in questions inherent to the nature of poetry and voice and construes "the event of wit as a transferential performance which takes at least two humans to tango."² The issue of pinning lyricism in Catullus down is fraught with traditional controversy; in this essay I am going to explore some of the themes that arise in attempting to define and engage with the amorphous 'Lyric Voice' in Catullus.

Catullus' place among the chorus of voices which inhabit his poetry is difficult to navigate and he explicitly engineers his poetry in such a way that we are forced to acknowledge Catullus in both his vocal presence and his deafening absence. The first two words of *C.50, hesterno Licini*, 'yesterday Licinius' (v1), combine an expression of time and a vocative address which inherently ask questions of presence. Every reader of the shifter *hesterno* must redefine what 'yesterday' is; to refer to 'yesterday' changes with every reading. The address to Licinius however, places this instance in a specific context, since when the voice of the poem speaks to Licinius he excludes our yesterdays and encloses the poem within a specific moment, the day before the night after the day he and Licinius had

¹ Henderson (1999) 69.

² *Ibid.*, 89.

engaged in the poetic ‘play’ (*lusimus (...) ludebat* vv2, 5). The game they were playing is one of improvisation in metre; the nature of which seems to rely on an instant reciprocity and response to the theme proposed by the poet before. Catullus captures this moment of highly-charged two-way composition and freezes it, committing it to paper. We receive Catullus’ turn in this revolving game every time we read the poem and we must create our own response. Catullus traps the reader in the moment between his three interactions with Licinius, the yesterday of every day the poem is read, captured by the pluperfect, *conuenerat* ‘we had agreed’ (v3), which recalls the past as a process, to the tomorrow of every day to come on which he might conclude with Licinius. The dynamic moves from them being present and writing together, to absent but vividly remembered. Thus they are ‘present’ all night; Licinius is absent, but written to. This poem highlights the conflict between speech and writing which characterises the space which the lyric voice seeks to occupy. The air of improvisation, speed and excitement in which Catullus frames this exchange in is undercut by the poem written about ‘this’ (*hoc* v16) written poem. ‘This’ poem is telling us about that poetry, and blurs the difference between them, whilst also stamping Catullus on to this poem, the one he makes his own, and separate from that which they made together. How are we to resolve “the relationship between the sense of lived experience the poetry conveys with the similarly strong impression of literary artificiality” which is apparent in writing about writing?³ This is the power of Catullus; in the nexus of this encounter he is ever-present, bridging the gap between the instant he captures and the forever in which the poem exists.

The poet himself is present throughout Catullus’ poems, imposed on the reader by his infamous (and often labelled gratuitous) obscenity. He is unfalteringly precise in his anatomy, his *membra*, ‘limbs’ (*C.50*) litter his corpus; *sinu* (lap) (...) *digitum* (finger) (*C.2*), *os oculosque* (mouth and eyes) (*C.9*), *duros lumbos* (stiff loins) (*C.16*). This brief summary of examples gives a flavour of the way Catullus exposes the human body. Catullus’ graphic obscenity forces you to become aware of every part of yourself, and also allows the poet, or the poem, indiscrete access to your entire being. You are fully present, but so is the poet. “You become aware of his words entering your ears. You acquire presence of mind” is how Byron describes it;⁴ by explicitly forcing your attention to his crude and invasive body imagery, Catullus forces himself onto the reader.

Physical presence and temporal presence are combined by Catullus in *C.68*. Lowrie draws attention to the importance of the deictic pronoun *hic* as a tool of indicating presence, and Catullus deploys the ambiguities of the lyric voice to move from the world of the poet to that of the reader. He refers to *hoc epistolum*, ‘this letter’ (v2) and *haec carta*, ‘this paper’ (v46), both of which self-consciously draw attention to themselves as the vehicles of communication. As with *C.50*, the reader is presented with a fictitious situation, the poem is presented to us as a letter, this letter, the one that Catullus is sending to Manlius in the present of the poem. Yet it is not, it is part of a collection of poems, and though it singles out Manlius as its addressee, it is not sent just to him, but to all recipients of the poem. By pretending that it is a letter, the reader becomes present in the exchange between the writer and Manlius. This principle extends to *haec carta*, this paper which Catullus is writing his poem/letter on. Catullus refers to ‘this’ paper; at the moment of conception it is the paper on which the poem was originally written, but when we read ‘this paper’, it refers to the paper of whatever copy we have. Yet *haec carta* retains its specific force, and by analogy extends the force of the original paper to every copy on which *haec carta* is written. The deictic pronoun points outside of the poet’s world into the readers, the lyric voice transcends its constraints; “the textual entity loses its physicality to become something that can be present in the same way to

³ Lowrie (2006) 115.

⁴ Byron in Henderson (1999) 70.

Catullus and his contemporaries, and to us.”⁵ *Hic* in *C.68* points to the presence of both the singular moment and the eternal, conjoining the first composition to every subsequent reading. *C.1* frames Catullus’ poetry with a similar movement, from *hoc libelli* ‘this book’ (v8), which he exhorts to last *plus uno (...) saeclo* ‘more than one age’ (v10). This book, which Catullus gives *tibi* ‘to you’ (v3), with the hope that it will last forever, is self-fulfilling. He continually gives (*dono* (v1) present tense) this book to you, you the eternal reader. We are not Cornelius, yet we are the recipients of this book, and Catullus anticipates the fulfilment of his hope that it will last forever by addressing it to you, the future reader.

Catullus throws prosaic dimensions of time out of the window, and his ambiguous deictics ensure that he is forever present. The full line 46 in *C.68* reads, *facite haec carta loquatur anus*, ‘let this paper speak in its old age’. The paper on which Catullus writes is not old, he anticipates the view of the future reader, and prospectively places himself present with us. Catullus’ voice refuses to speak from one point in time, but reaches for the future and speaks to us in our present, he seems to operate in a more “metaphorical and less localised understanding of (...) space and the physical reality of literary artefacts”.⁶ In this sense the poem alters its original existence through its presumptive and analeptic age. However, this is taken further in v32, when the poem refuses to acknowledge its existence, or rather denies its existence and conforms to the metafiction it creates. Catullus espouses an absolutist stance with regards to the gifts of poetry which Manlius requests of him; the death of his brother prevents him from writing. Catullus portrays his *luctus* (v31), ‘grief’, as such that he cannot write poetry. Yet this sentiment is expressed in a poem in a ‘letter’ to Manlius. The poem’s very existence rails against the all-consuming grief which we are led to believe Catullus is experiencing, and brings to the fore a sense of literary artifice. The reader is forced to acknowledge the fiction of poetry, snapped back from the fabulous narrative Catullus has woven in this meta-poetic contradiction. *Haec munera*, ‘these gifts’ (v32) refer to the gifts of poetry requested which Catullus pointedly bewails being unable to give, yet once again the deictic points outside the narrative frame to the poem the reader is beholding. The gift of poetry is present in the face of its denial, and Catullus is tied to this paradox.

Embedded in the nature of *C.68* is an acceptance of its own artificiality, yet at its heart lies Catullus’ grief at his brother’s death, which should not be taken as constructed or fake, but as mediated. The apostrophe *o misero frater*, ‘o wretched brother’ (v20) is an address which is “uttered in full knowledge of the impossibility of its receipt.”⁷ Catullus changes the addressee of the poem; forgotten is the ‘letter’ to Manlius, Catullus now addresses his dead brother. This serves both to further the sense of intrusion placed on the reader through its infinitely more personal nature, and to bring the reader closer to the fore, as death recognises permanent and irrevocable absence. The futility of Catullus’ speech underscores this sense of absence of the intended recipient and consequently highlights the presence of the reader. This refusal to acknowledge reality frames the aforementioned denial of existence and time in the poem, and frames their purpose as a self-conscious removal from reality on Catullus’ part. To deny the passing of time and to deny the existence of the poem as a gift, are to deny the death of his brother, something we might say Catullus is desperate to achieve with this poem. Presence is indeed key, but it is the absence of his brother which drives Catullus’ need to be so fully present.

Furthermore, Catullus draws attention to the place of voice in his poetry through his exploration of silence. *C.101* is a further address to Catullus’ brother, and the impotence of both (inter)locutors is stressed in v4, *et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem*, ‘so I might address your silent ashes to no purpose’. The burned out remnant of Catullus’ brother, the

⁵ Lowrie (2006) 118.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁷ Lowrie (2006) 117.

one-man Trojan *cinerem* ‘ashes’ which he addresses will never be responsive, the gesture does not expect a response. However *mutam* ‘silent’ personifies the ashes but then strips them of voice, making their silence all the more poignant. It is not just the ashes which are stripped of voice here, Catullus’ address is *nequiquam* ‘in vain’; his speech is undercut and futile. The final line of the poem, *atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale*, ends this protracted farewell with that eponymous term, but anticipates the unforthcoming response by playing both parts, *ave atque vale*, Catullus must say both hello and goodbye. The silence of his brother’s ashes looms over the poem, forcing Catullus to fill it and to recognise the futility of his own speech. Voice is void in the face of death, but Catullus still manages to hold a conversation, one wherein the reader is as helplessly silent as the dead and mute ashes. Anne Carson’s intense consideration of *C.101* in *Nox*, written around the effect of her absent brother on her and her mother, plays off Catullus in a ferocious scrutiny of life.⁸ She explores what it means to have a missing brother, and seems to capture the event of his absent presence in her boxed concertina creation, an interesting parallel to place alongside Catullus’ own portrayal of his relation to his absent brother. The communality of expression which Carson finds in Catullus for her own experience seems to exemplify the merging of voice between poet and reader.

C.49 cues in the next two poems by comparing Cicero and Catullus, the opening word, *disertissime* drawing attention to the various claims on ‘eloquence’ held by oratory and poetry, allowing *C.50* to steal the show for poetry. *C.51* follows, in which Catullus again shows the impossibility of controlling what other people can hear, and his impotence is shown in his own ‘silence’. The man who sits opposite Lesbia *spectat et audit* (v4), sees and hears her, while Catullus stands rooted, *lingua torpet* (v9), with a sluggish tongue. Here the three interlocutors of this situation form a dynamic which deals variously with speech and silence. Lesbia speaks to the man, and the man hears Lesbia, whilst Catullus is neither the recipient of speech nor able to speak. In a similar way to how the overheard lyric utterance is meant to alienate the reader, Catullus is the intruder to this conversation, and his silence mirrors the impotence of the reader to actively engage. Catullus comes to us thus, senseless, *omnis eripit sensus mihi*, ‘it steals all senses from me’ (v6). Why Catullus might deny his own voice is an interesting dilemma. This poem is a ‘translation’ of one of Sappho’s Greek love poems, and Catullus takes on the mantle and position of Sappho in this situation, thus rendering his own speech unnecessary. He has placed himself within a literary tradition, and ‘speaks’ as Sappho. The speakers in this poem are the object of affection, Lesbia, and the pre-author, Sappho. Catullus’ silence is a tacit recognition of being the site of the meeting of the two, and thus he assimilates the entirety of Sappho’s love rhetoric into his own emotion for Lesbia. Translation recognises that it is halfway between speaking and silence; *C.65* sees Catullus ‘not’ being able to write poetry, and it is followed by *C.66*, a translation of Callimachus. The blush (*rubor*) which ends *C.65* is not that of Callimachus, but Catullus, who recognises - and lyricises - the liminal silence of translation.

Catullus deals with silence more violently throughout his poetry with the trope of irrumation. Fitzgerald points out the potential analogy between irrumation and poetry, “which puts words into people’s mouths; it speaks for everybody and everything while all else is silent”.⁹ Poetry in this sense can be aggressive, and in *C.74* it is possible to see how closely irrumation and the lyric voice are interlinked. The poet explicitly ties speech and action together, in the context of ‘naughtiness’, *(ali)quis delicias diceret aut faceret*, ‘anyone who spoke or acted in a naughty way’ (v2). Poetics and erotics form the same continuum here, Gellius sleeps with his uncles’ wife to stop him ‘censuring’ (*obiurgare*) him. The sexual act

⁸ Carson (2010).

⁹ Fitzgerald (1996) 73.

prevents the verbal reproach, and by sexually undermining his uncle, Gellius gains the verbal superiority. This point is made explicitly in the *irrumet* of v5: Gellius could sexually demean and debase his uncle and still he would not be able to censure his nephew's 'naughtiness' without exposing himself as cuckolded. Gellius has not only metaphorically silenced his uncle, but physically manifests his silencing in the act of irrumation. If this was not clear enough, the uncle is identified as Harpocrates, an eastern god of Silence. The absolute removal of loquacious autonomy which has been enacted in this poem is a testament to the power of Catullus' poetry, seen in his own verbal irrumation of his 'critics' in *C.16*. The characters of Catullus' poems are similarly worked by Catullus, all the words they speak are given to them by Catullus; their autonomy of speech is a textual fable. Whilst their mouths are full Catullus speaks, just as Catullus fills the reader's mouth with his poem. In this way silence is the medium of lyric; it gives itself voice by taking ours away.

Catullus further exercises control over what is said and claims authority over the very nature of speech, to the exclusion of all competing claims. In *C.43* Catullus addresses a girl in a series of privatives, she has *nec bello pede nec nigris ocellis*, 'neither a pretty foot nor black eyes' (v2). Catullus refuses to acknowledge what the girl is; she is defined solely by what she is not. He compounds this refusal with the phrase *narrat esse bellam*, 'claims to be pretty' (v6). The use of *narrat* is loaded with a sense of contemptuous invective, precisely because it is someone else's 'telling' of what is beautiful. The criteria set out in the poem are Catullus' definition of beauty (one might imagine it to be based on the Lesbia whom the poem lauds). But Catullus will not allow any conception of beauty that does not conform to his standard; 'is it you that your region claims is beautiful?' The palpable scorn denies any other narration of beauty except that which Catullus gives. Even that which is being derided is not given voice, the 'alternative' version of beauty is never aired; all the words connected with beauty spring from Catullus' ideal. The opening of *C.87* is similarly exclusive, *nulla potest mulier tantum se dicere amatam vere, quantum a me Lesbia amata mea est* 'no woman can say she has been loved truly as much as Lesbia has been loved by me'. Catullus deals absolutely with language, 'no woman can say'; he unequivocally removes the agency of all women to speak, to have a competing claim to his own. There can be no subjectivity to Catullus' love, it is the truth; or rather, he imposes his subjectivity onto the world. He actively forbids speech other than his own here, he controls language, and by extension, he controls love. Catullus' voice is the only voice, and it imposes its petulant epigrammatic authority over all speech.

Catullus teases out a similar imposition of language control in *C.50*, less sullenly and more elegantly, though arguably still as forcefully. The specific type of improvised responsive poetry which he claims to be engaged in here demands a response. Catullus asserts he is playing this game, and the poem is his turn in the cycle. However, the onus is on Licinius (and as we have seen the reader), to reply, it is an imperative, part of the nature of the 'game' being played.¹⁰ However, the middle section of the poem is riddled with the language of erotics; *incensus* 'on fire' (v8), *miserum*, 'wretched' (v9), *furore* 'with frenzy' (v10). Thus Catullus transforms the theme of the poem, from innocent larks to erotic foreplay, and Licinius is bound by the conventions of the game to respond with a theme in kind. Catullus has unfairly changed the nature of the relationship between himself and the recipient of the poem. The reply must be made, following the same theme, and thus Catullus exerts pre-emptive control over the language of the reply, and the tone, which must now be erotic. This imperative driving force is made explicit by the invocation to Nemesis at the close of the poem, who may *poenas reposcat*, 'demand punishment' (v20); as Catullus is demanding a certain type of language so too Nemesis demands its fulfilment.

¹⁰ Burgess (1986) 576-586.

Catullus similarly controls language in *C.6*, when he laments Flavius' silence and claims he would create charming poetry if Flavius would tell him about his new girlfriend. However, this poem denies the need for any such interaction on Flavius' part; Catullus has created *lepido versu* 'elegant verses' (v17) without Flavius' input. Flavius is not given the chance to describe his own "marathon of erotic aerobics on Catullus' page".¹¹ Thus though Catullus laments Flavius' silence, he shows that he does not require other people's speech to create poetry; the poet can inspire bedsprings and silence Flavius. The *tremulique quassa lecti argutatio*, 'the shaken creaking of the rickety bed' (v10), which shouts (*clamat*) the details of Flavius' sex life is part of a broader proliferation of *personae loquentes* in Catullus' poetry.¹² The tacit Flavius is contrasted to the talkative bed; here the metaphorical sense is clearly foregrounded, it is the obvious noise the bed makes at night under Flavius and his love which must so obviously 'shout' that he has a new lover. If he has one that is; Catullus says that there must be a girl and he will invent one no matter what, it is better that Flavius makes up his own girlfriend and the creaking of the bed, rather than giving Catullus full rein to invent and interpret both.

However, Catullus' talking objects are not always so implicit; his *phaselus* 'boat' of *C.4* 'speaks' more explicitly. In the poem a complex chain of speech, address and communication demarcate the dynamics of voice, and the supernatural 'speaking' ship integrally flags these issues up. However, though verbs of speaking permeate the poem, *ait* 'speaks' (vv2, 15), *negat* 'denies' (v6), the antithesis between direct and indirect speech is blurred by the Graecising nominative and infinitive construction, which blurs subject and object. The speaker of the poem reports the speech of the *phaselus*; the speech of the poem is neither fully the little boat's nor that of the speaker, language is "held at arm's length (...) and performs."¹³ The voice of the poem will not be tied down, and its ambiguity is reflective of the unusual nature of a talking ship, as well as the roaming ship itself. The strangeness of the voice comes out in the uniform strict iambics, the abnormal Greek structure in this Catullus poem highlights that it is pretending to be something else. The content of the poem seems funerary, recounting the voyages of the ship, yet the "endlessly performative present tense" counters this to give a sense of presence and life to the ship.¹⁴ The tale the ship spins seems to move backwards in time to its pre-naval life as part of a wood, *silva* (v11), then forward again *ad usque limpidum lacum* (v24), 'right up to this limpid lake', bringing us back to a present time frame. This *ομφαλος*¹⁵ structure allows a ring-composition to the poem which disregards a conventional time-line. This typically Catullan refusal allows him to defy the expectation of death at the end of the poem, as mentioned, the continuous present of the poem points to a liminal moment which Catullus has frozen, trapped between life and death.

¹¹ Henderson (1999) 76.

¹² Talking objects Catullus which populate Catullus' world (*personae loquentes*);

C.17, O Colonia, C.31, Sirmio, C.44, O funde noster (Geographical group) – Catullus brings the landscape of his life alive by addressing the places with affection.

C. 41 – Aemeana non est sana (v7) because she does not ask the mirror what she looks like. Catullus tells her what the mirror would say, speaking for an inanimate object that should 'speak' but is silent.

C.42 – Catullus addresses his poetry, *adeste hendecasyllabi*, in a poem written in hendecasyllables on a writing tablet in order to recover his poems and writing tablets. The marked self-referential tone raises the issue of whether we will ever know what the lyric poet is doing or if he is just seeing how far he can go.

C. 67 – salve (...) ianua, Catullus holds a conversation with a door who reveals the truths hidden by the human occupants.

C. 80 – clamant (...) rupta (...) ilia, body parts speak, revealing the sexual misdemeanours of their owners.

C.105, 114, 115 – mentula epigrams – he describes walking, talking penises, yet it is not a metaphor but Catullus actually populates the world with body parts, turning expectations on their head.

¹³ Fitzgerald (1996) 109.

¹⁴ Davis (2002) 111-143.

¹⁵ Hornsby (1963) 257.

The account we hear is from a senescent entity, not a posthumous one, the ship *senet* (v26), it ages. As has been explored in *C.101*, the dead are denied voice, but here the living ship constantly relives its ‘life’. The invocation to *gemelle Castor et gemelle Castoris* (v26), ‘twin Castor and twin of Castor’ reflects this duality. The Dioscuri share their immortality; each is a god on alternate days, eternally trapped in an abnormal cycle of life. The ship dedicates himself to them, *dedicat tibi* (v25), and thus its existence can be understood on the terms of the twin gods.

The address at the opening of the poem, delayed until the last word of the line, *hospites*, gives a pseudo-epigraphical tone to the poem. The Latin form of the Greek *ξενος*, this term occupies the space around friend/guest/stranger. The address seems to mirror the dedicatory inscription on a tomb, the universal address to the passer-by.¹⁶ This allows Catullus to distance the poem from the reader, you are a stranger who is welcome to be a guest and a friend whilst they read this, but who, like all travellers, will pass on. Every reader is the temporary ‘*hospes*’ of Catullus, but he is the host that will last forever. To frame the poem as an inscription gives it this anachronistic posthumous tone, which the ‘retired’ ship does not yet deserve. However, the implications of such an address to the generic ‘*hospes*’ who might read this allows it to address all future readers of the “‘inscription’ buried in the poem”.¹⁷ Once again, Catullus’ presence endures, as an epigram is supposed to. But this ‘epigram’ holds the continuity of the end, the ship is not allowed to die, but frozen in the act of recording its life, and forced to endlessly perform. The “sum of readers (...) are readily collapsible into posterity”¹⁸; we as readers, are indistinguishable from all those who have ‘read’ this before, and all those who will read it, the present/posthumous paradox not only freezes the ship in time, but also the reader. Or rather, Catullus protracts that single moment in time to encompass perpetuity (as he promised in *C.1*).

The Lyric Voice in Catullus can thus be seen to encompass a wide variety of themes within his poetry, all linked by a consideration of the role of the voice and speech in poetry that seems overheard. Lyric poetry hinges on the simulation of this overheard utterance, “presence and distance inhabit the poetry in equal measures”.¹⁹ As has been observed, the poems have volumes to say about their own nature, and it is this which lies at the heart of the lyric voice. Allowing the voice of the poem to be heard and giving “special authority” to the interpretation it gives itself is part of the event of lyric.²⁰ The poetry asks questions of voice by exploring who is speaking, the various claims to vocality demand to be heard. The Lyric Voice is ‘Catullus’, as a polyphony of voices for which his poetry is the vehicle; hence the title of the essay is not ‘The Lyric Voice of Catullus’, but ‘Catullus and the Lyric Voice’. We can examine the spoken word *in* Catullus by framing it with reference to the spoken word *of* Catullus; the explicit voices of the poetry and the implicit words of the poetry by its nature. The Lyric Voice belongs to the reader, Catullus’ reader, whom with every reading recreates and relives the event in the essential utterance of Lyric.

¹⁶ Davis (2002) 111-143.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 123.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 123.

¹⁹ Lowrie (2006) 115.

²⁰ Hošek and Parker (1985) 51.

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