

Contemporary Catullus: Catullan Reception in Modernist and Contemporary Poetry

In 1916, Ezra Pound wrote that “Catullus, Propertius, Horace and Ovid are the people who matter. Catullus most.” Pound was prescient: the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen a blossoming of Catullan reception. Catullus was championed by Modernists as a canonical author, who challenged the norms of conservative Rome much like they challenged their own poetic establishment. Catullus played a similar role during the 18th century, as demonstrated by Henry Stead. For non-traditional poets, Catullus looms large not in spite of, but because of his dynamic *persona* and strong language. We propose a panel on his more recent appearances in poetry, from the avant-garde poetics of e.e. cummings to the recent translations by Brandon Brown. The panelists tackle Catullan influence and reception in a number of ways and tease out elements in Catullus’ poetry that make him an appealing interlocutor for modern and contemporary poets. This panel shows Catullus has been a major influence for the poetic style and subject-matter of a number of experimental and avant-garde poets of the 20th and 21st centuries.

The first paper investigates the resonances between two poems of e.e. cummings and Catullus. Catullus’ revolutionary Neoteric flourishes encourage cummings to create his own rhythms and eccentric typological trimmings. Cummings knew what he was doing, and he was consciously echoing Catullus. Both poets are shown to creatively depict the lover’s vexed relationship with time (i.e. never enough with the beloved) as well as the way the written text (and grammatical rules) shape their perspectives on love, life, and death. Catullus signposts such questions with polyptoton, while cummings’ creative typescript and line shape calls attention to his conscious equating of the poem with his own emotional life (“since feeling is first” indeed!).

The second paper turns to the *urbanitas* of Catullus and the analogous poet-around-town Frank O'Hara in mid- 20th century New York City. O'Hara ventriloquizes Catullan subject-matter with an eye to crafting an updated *persona* that speaks to his own urban environment. The author shows how, since O'Hara sees more than a kindred soul in Catullus, he can act as another of his readers who is always in on the latest gossip or the ins-and-outs of the social scene. By keeping Catullus as a representative of *urbanitas* in mind, we can see how O'Hara creates meaningful verse on subjects and themes that may seem less "poetic" at first glance. It is the urbane poet who can uncover and imbue these topics with vibrant meaning, and the author points to shared moments in the works of O'Hara and Catullus that evoke this *urbanitas*.

The third paper explores the centrality of Catullus to the poetics of the experimental poet Bernadette Mayer. Her published volumes *Sonnets* (1989) and *The Formal Field of Kissing* (1990) collect poems and translations produced over the previous decade. While both may at first appear more traditional than her earlier work from the 1970s, they experiment in striking ways with Catullan themes and formal features, especially flexible concepts of authorship, gender, and sexuality. By translating his poems to Juvenius and poems of obscene invective, often in collaboration with others, she creates a passionate Catullan persona who doesn't shy away from seemingly unpoetic details of daily life. For Mayer, Catullus offered a model of how to recuperate some gestures towards clarity and form while still maintaining many of the thematic and stylistic features of her earlier work.

The fourth paper analyzes the translation of Catullus 85, the famous *odi et amo* epigram, in the 2011 translation of Brandon Brown. With his characteristic wry and colloquial humor, Brown manipulates sophisticated techniques of phonic translation and repetition to expand Catullus' couplet to a startling length of almost two hundred lines and one photograph. The

author compares Brown's technique to the complex fugues of Johann Sebastian Bach. Over the course of the poem, Brown analyzes it word by word, with attention to syntax and the chiasmic arrangement, which he labels X and compares to a crucifix. By the end, he seems to have fully identified with Catullus, following the translational precepts of Dryden, and recounts an episode of calling someone on the telephone: "I call | you on your landline, I call you like I'm Catullus, confused | ambivalent..."

While Yeats could conclude a poem "Lord what would they say / Did their Catullus walk that way?" ("The Scholars"), and Frost often kept a copy of Catullus by his bed (Arkins 474), this panel unearths more radical points of Catullan connection in these modern poets, their personae, their poetry and translations, and their depictions of love and desire.

Bibliography

Arkins, Brian. 2007. "The Modern Reception of Catullus" in Skinner (ed.) *A Companion to Catullus*. Blackwell. 461-78.

Stead, Henry. 2015. *A Cockney Catullus: The Reception of Catullus in Romantic Britain, 1795-1821*. OUP.