

City Poems: *Amicitia* and *Urbanitas* in Catullus and O'Hara

*Cui dono lepidum novum libellum  
arido modo pumice expolitum?  
Corneli, tibi; namque tu solebas  
meas esse aliquid putare nugas...*  
(Cat. 1.1-4)

There's an endearing forwardness to the lines that famously open Catullus 1—a feeling as if we had just bumped into the first-person speaker in the middle of a busy street, hands extended with this little tome magically at the ready. Whether or not we answer to the name Cornelius, we are addressed as the favored recipient of a book—which is not just a book, however small (*libellum*) or trifling (*meas...nugas*) a volume it is—but in fact a hot-off-the-presses (*novum*), elegant (*lepidum*), and highly refined (*expolitum*) art-object. In these opening four lines, Catullus issues a programmatic statement about the social nature and function of his poetry. Each poem is a kind of conversation between three parties: the first-person speaker as the simultaneously public and private voice of the poet; the reader as the poet's personal acquaintance; and the poem itself as a token which both honors and expresses the poet's feelings towards this acquaintance. We might even more accurately call this three-way conversation a form of literary "intercourse," since many of Catullus's poems dramatize the specifically sexual relations between Catullus and his friends, lovers, competitors, and enemies throughout Rome.

This self-conscious sociability has reinforced Catullus's reputation today as a brilliant, versatile, by turns highly refined and shockingly vulgar poet-socialite-wit of ancient Rome. This is why, perhaps, in 1966 American Beat poet Allen Ginsberg would observe the following on the occasion of the untimely death of his friend, the New York poet Frank O'Hara:

“...he had a tremendous sensitivity for style, for chatty campy style and also for real high style... And he integrated purely personal life into the high art of composition, marking the return of all authority back to person. He taught me to really see New York for the first time, by making of the giant style of Midtown his intimate cocktail environment. It’s like having Catullus change your view of the Forum in Rome.” (Schjeldahl)

If we are to take Ginsberg’s comparison seriously, what sort of poetics do Catullus and O’Hara share? How are we able to detect the same chatty, sociable “vernacular,” the campiness, gossip, and “high art” in these poets, despite their differences in linguistic and historical context (Perlow, 135)? How do the urban social worlds and literary economies of Augustus’s Rome and post-World War II New York shape the poetics of writers like Catullus and O’Hara, respectively?

At the most obvious level, Ginsberg seems to suggest an aesthetic-social correspondence between O’Hara’s public and artistic role as poet-about-town of the 1960s New York art scene and Catullus as “urbane” poet-lover-wit-profligate of Augustan Rome. In both poets’ works, the urbane first-person speaker deliberately blurs the lines between who is speaking and who is writing, between the historical personage of the author and the (potentially) infinitely pliant voice of the poem in the immediacy of its address. Alternately garrulous, impulsive, and self-parodic, both Catullus (Krostenko, 239) and O’Hara dash off poems to acquaintances, friends, lovers, rivals, other writers and other artists with equal turns praise, derision, ridicule, and pity. Both vacillate between registers of vulnerable immediacy and lofty snobbishness, between heart-rending grief and side-splitting obscenity. It was O’Hara who once irreverently termed the medium of poetry itself as the “Lucky Pierre” in the homosexual triad of poet-poem-addressee, the “lucky” intermediary sandwiched between lovers, a kind of phone call in text form (so

O'Hara conceived his tongue-in-cheek poetic movement of "Personism") (Oever, 527). We might have expected a similarly bawdy *ars poetica* from Catullus who, like O'Hara, adopts a mixture of love poems, insults, jokes, and 'serious' compositions as he "testifies to the collaborative, social, and ludic nature of verse" (Eburne and Epstein, 5). This paper examines these resonances across centuries and the immediacy of Catullus and O'Hara's impudent-affectionate mode of address by comparing Catullus's shorter poems with O'Hara's similarly slender, highly polished *libellum* entitled *Lunch Poems*. Examining these instances of the new, the charming, and the refined in both Catullus and O'Hara's "little" poems will outline a transhistorical poetics of *urbanitas* that emerges in both these poets' works.

#### Bibliography

Eburne, Jonathan and Andrew Epstein. "Introduction: Poetry Games." *Comparative Literature Studies*, 51.1, 2014, 1-17.

Krostenko, Brian. "Arbitraria Urbanitatis: Language, Style, and Characterization in Catullus cc. 39 and 37." *Classical Antiquity*, 20. 2, 2001, 239-272.

Oever, Roel Van Den. "'A common ear/for our deep gossip': Selfhood and Friendship in the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg and Frank O'Hara." *Amerikastudien*, 53. 4, 2008, 521-533.

Perlow, Seth. "Anonymity: Frank O'Hara Makes Strangers With Friends." *Technology and the American Lyric*, University of Minnesota Press.

Schjeldahl, Peter. "Frank O'Hara: He Made Things and People Sacred." *The Village Voice*, 1 June 2019, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2019/06/01/frank-ohara-he-made-things-and-people-sacred/>