Hip Sublime

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Writtten in the summer of 1954, Robert Creeley’s “Stomping with Catullus” became a means for him to test his Beat credentials.¹ The poem is a translation, in the form of a theme and variations, of Catullus’s poem “Nulli se dicit” (Carmen 70), but its explicit pushing at poetic limits (of translation and of rhythm) mark it as an important early instance of Creeley’s experimental, countercultural, poetic practice. At the time he was writing this poem Creeley’s first marriage was falling apart.² Angrily brought to task by his friend, poet Paul Blackburn, for recent adulterous affairs, Creeley bitterly denounced another friend’s, Paul Carroll’s, translations of Catullus, which had been strongly influenced and guided by Blackburn. Creeley described Carroll’s translations as “awkward, stuttering, pompous,” and blamed this squarely on the influence of Blackburn’s wife, Freddie (Faas 2001, 172–73). “Stomping with Catullus” can be seen, therefore (and fittingly, given Catullus’s reputation for vicious and vituperative poems) as Creeley’s revenge on what he saw as a poetic betrayal and as a response to accusations of sexual infidelity (173–74). Given such circumstances, this essay argues that in “Stomping with Catullus” we see Creeley’s performance of himself as a “Beat” poet eventuating from what I’m calling a poetics of adultery.

¹. The poem was written “by August 26, 1954.” See Novik 1973, 115. It was first published in the collection All That is Lovely in Men (1955).
². The events surrounding this breakup are fictionalized in Creeley’s novel, The Island (1963) and documented in Faas 2001.
While such a poetics of adultery rests on questions of fidelity (to poetic sources; between lovers) that are underscored by Creeley’s use of Catullus, I want also to argue that it therefore underpins a broader, though no less troubled, negotiation with Beat aesthetics. And this, too, has broader implications for thinking about Creeley’s place in the articulation of what has come to be known—after Donald Allen’s influential anthology of 1960—as the “New American Poetry.”

The issue of fidelity raised by “Stomping with Catullus” becomes, that is, a cultural—countercultural—and ethical issue within Creeley’s poetics. The detailed reading of “Stomping with Catullus” that follows in this essay aims, then, to show how questions of fidelity are, for Creeley, more than simply subject matter—poetic “content”—made available to him via Catullus. Rather, Creeley’s poetics of adultery comes to constitute an essential part of his poetic “stance toward reality” at this early stage in his poetic career.

This means that the Beat pose adopted by Creeley in “Stomping with Catullus”—via what we might think of as his “adulterous” appropriation of the original Catullus poem—grounds his poetics in ethical—or, more properly, as I shall argue, poethical—questions. As we shall see, such questions are linked to the argument against Stoicism staged by Catullus’s poetry and to Lucretius’s discussion of things (as atomistic) and nature (as ethical) in De Rerum Natura. In effect, then, “Stomping with Catullus” also undercuts its own easy co-option to Beat aesthetics by asserting the larger poethical terms under which the New American poetics—experimental, countercultural, and profoundly unsettled—can be seen coming to operate in postwar America.

While Creeley’s poetics of adultery helps chart these various aesthetic, poetic, and cultural maneuvers, it also—therefore—frames the ways in which “Stomping with Catullus” (alongside “The Whip” and “The Rain,” which are discussed later in this essay) questions the idea of being a Beat poet and the relationship of Beat to classic. The aim of this essay is not so much, therefore, to plot Creeley’s place within a genealogy of translations of Catullus into English (there have been many such translations subsequent to Catullus’s first printing in England in 1684, so Creeley’s reading strategy in respect of Catullus is hardly new [see Gaisser 2001, xxviii]). Rather, my delineation of Cree-

3. In the context of such a poetics of adultery, it is worth noting that among the Creeley poems selected by Allen for his anthology, The New American Poetry, are “The Whip” (discussed later in this essay), “A Marriage,” “Ballad of the Despairing Husband,” and “Just Friends,” all poems dealing with marital breakup and adulterous relationships.

4. Charles Olson’s famous and highly influential essay “Projective Verse” (1950) asserts that the new poetics, what he terms “OPEN verse” or “COMPOSITION BY FIELD,” “involves a stance toward reality outside a poem as well as a new stance towards the reality of a poem itself.” See Olson 1997, 239 and 246.
ley’s poetics of adultery in “Stomping with Catullus” sees the “New Roman” (or “neoteric”) poet as Creeley’s means of exemplifying and embodying the concerns of a New American poetics to pull against ’50s conformity and containment culture. This impulse is undoubtedly related to the concerns of the Beat generation, yet the readings of Creeley that follow—stemming from his “adulterous” poetic relationship to Catullus—contrast his poetic unsettledness, hesitation, and stuttering articulacy with a more assured, propulsive, Beat poetics. How far, the essay asks, can we read Creeley as a Beat poet when more seems to be at stake about the nature of things in his poetics than is encapsulated in Beat spontaneity and its mythologization of countercultural protest?

Before turning to a detailed examination of “Stomping with Catullus,” it is worth noting an occasion where Creeley’s performance of himself as a Beat poet is seen in relation to this poem. Speaking at a poetry reading in San Francisco in May 1956 (barely six months after the 6 Gallery Poetry reading there, which was—if we believe most literary histories—the event that launched the Beats into broader public attention), Creeley had this to say about his poem:

“This is actually the one poem of Catullus as [that] I could ever remember, having studied Latin a long long time ago. The first verse is a literal translation of the poem and those that follow are variations of it in a jazz idiom.”

Creeley’s reading of such a poem, “in a jazz idiom,” in San Francisco, in 1956, might very well be seen as certifying his Beat credentials. Much like Sal Paradise’s motivations for going West at the start of On the Road, Creeley’s reason for being in San Francisco at this time had “something to do with the miserably weary split-up” of his marriage (Kerouac 1957, 7). Indeed, “Stomping with Catullus” is a poem that (as can be heard emphatically in recordings of Creeley reading it) gives itself up, as it were, to the beat, to a sense of the rhythm of things. However, the question of (poetic) fidelity that haunts Creeley’s maneuver from literal translation to jazz idiom over the course of “Stomping with Catullus” significantly destabilizes the relationship of Beat to classic. This is witnessed in the poem’s slippery status as a translation and set of variations, in its idiomatic speech and rhythms, and in its troubled sense of a lover’s faithfulness, all of which might be broadened out into a wider cultural con-

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6. As we shall see later, this can be related to a Heideggerian notion of poetic letting go, Gelassenheit.
cern with how a poem might be faithful to—come to represent—a particular moment: the Beats in the ’50s, the turbulent Roman Republic in the 50s BCE.

Such worries about poetic and cultural fidelity are encapsulated, as we shall see, by the poem’s attempt to make ironic play from the gap between what lovers say and what they do. Indeed, as Julia Gaisser has pointed out, not only does Carmen 70’s repeated use of the word dicit (“she says”) “hammer home a distrust of words and promises” by “implying an antithesis between words and actions,” but the ironies of sexual infidelity insinuated by Catullus in this poem are modeled on an earlier text, Callimachus’s Epigram 11 (Gaisser 2009, 32–34). Whether Creeley was aware or not of this longer literary history evoked by Catullus’s poem, his act of translation of it certainly registers, and explicitly raises questions about, poetic origins and the authenticity of a poet’s experience. And this pulls against the reification of spontaneity of expression in much Beat writing. If “Stomping with Catullus” is a Beat poem, we might wonder, what do its repeated readings—“variations” as Creeley has it—of Catullus tell us about a poetics of being-in-the-moment akin to Ginsberg’s “first thought best thought” ideal? How does the diffidence, hesitation, and anxiety about the transience of a lover’s declarations that is evident in “Stomping with Catullus” (and its going back over the same ground five times) square with a Beat poetics that is often associated with assuredness, declarative utterances, and onward propulsion (as in Ginsberg’s Howl, or in jazz-like improvisation)?

We might also be brought to wonder why it is this Catullus poem that Creeley remembers. Carmen 70 is certainly not Catullus’s most famous or commented upon poem (it’s not the Attis, or “odi et amo” [Carmina 63 and 85]). Indeed, for a poet famed for bawdiness, and eroticism, this is remarkably diffident and restrained, enigmatic even, in its critique of the lover. What it witnesses is not a brash condemnation of Clodia’s/Lesbia’s adultery and political machinations (as in a number of the more famous poems), but a recognition of the very difficulties of coming to poetic terms with infidelity. It is precisely this, I think, that appeals to Creeley. It should also be remembered that Carmen 70 is a transitional poem; it is, as Kenneth Quinn has noted, a poem that “strikes a new note” (1972, 103). In the sequence of Catullus’s poems, it comes at a point where the longer middle poems give way to shorter, epigrammatic ones. Written in elegiac couplets, nulli se dicit is a poem very much about coupling. This too, I think, is why Creeley remembers it, and that

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7. For Wiseman, this poem represents “a new tone in Catullus’ love poetry—cooler and more analytical than the outbursts of joy or fury in the first book” (1985, 166).
will become more apparent when we look at the form that his translation and variations of the Catullus poem takes.

As we turn to take a closer look at the poem itself, Creeley’s comment that “Stomping with Catullus” is in “a jazz idiom” serves to underline that which is absolutely explicit in the poem, namely its awareness of, and play with, the question of rhythm, of the Beat, or in a phrase favored by Creeley, its “sense of measure.” The poem proceeds by developing an increasingly insistent sense of rhythm, a largely four-beat trochaic measure that pulls against the apparently conversational tone. This is important not only because such poetic stomping is central to the poem’s affective power but because it also provides Creeley with a means of measuring ideas of the human and of relationship (as we will see later in his poem “The Whip”). The question of the beat that the poem embodies, then, becomes an insistently cultural question. Indeed, we might read the poem’s jazzy syncopations as, themselves, setting in train a set of “adulterous” relationships in which we can hear a rhythmic pulling against the sorts of cultural and social four-square conformity that defines Cold War containment culture.8

The first section, comprising eight lines, of “Stomping with Catullus” provides, as it were, the theme upon which the subsequent four sections of the poem riff. Though Creeley describes this section as “a literal translation” of the Catullus original, it is clear from the outset that repetition and hesitation, even the very sounds the poem makes, are being used to significantly complicate the ways in which it might be working as “translation.” Aware of its role in repeating an old theme—misunderstanding between lovers; misinterpreting their intentions—“Stomping with Catullus” opens directly into repetition as a means of marking the difficulty of that theme, the difficulty of saying what one means:

My love—my love says
she loves me.
And that she would never have
anyone but me.

Though what a woman tells
to a man who pushes her
should be written in wind and quickly

The poem thus announces itself clearly as one that will test and explore sexual relationships. This is apparent in the play between the poem's speaker and his lover, and how this is broadened into a general (and presumably exemplary case) of “a man” and “a woman” in the second stanza.

The repeated “my” in the poem's first line means that its exploration of relationship is colored by an examination of ownership. Not only does the poet see his “love” as his possession but he is troubled by how he might, as a poet, possess the theme of love. While Creeley draws out these notes of ownership and repetition from his original (Catullus writes “mulier mea”—“my woman”—in his first line and repeats the use of “mulier”—a more generic reference to “woman”—in line 3 [Quinn 1972, 103, 288n30])


10. See Kerouac's (1959) description of Bop's transgressive cultural force as a “wild, impossible mistake in jazz... [in which] Thelonious [Monk] introduced a wooden off-key note to everyone's warmup notes” (51).
possession announced in the opening line and contrasts markedly with the rhyme of “her” and “water” in lines 6 and 8. Through the simple action of the rhyming pattern in these stanzas, the speaker’s self-assuredness is thus undercut by his anxiety over the fidelity of the object of his love. Not only does the repetition of “me” come to sound like worried special pleading but the possessive pronoun (“her”) that is attached to the generic “a woman” signals the slipping away of the actual lover into a type, into an example of love more broadly conceived. This then complicates the poem’s opening contemplation of “My love,” a phrase that—through its repetition in the poem’s first line—sets up a play between the speaker’s lover (as in “my love says”) and the poem’s investigation of the broader theme of love itself (as in the possibly more abstract-meaning “My love–”). Such slippages and complications are enacted in the poem’s rhymes: the not quite perfect rhyme of “her” and “water” does indeed feel like water slipping through the poem’s fingers.

The speaker’s use of the trope of running water as a figure both for his lover’s (and lovers’, more broadly) inconstancy and for his anxieties about that inconstancy is, itself, a repetition of an old poetic image, one that Catullus himself was repeating from Greek poetry. In Creeley’s usage, the image is itself rendered slippery. First, it runs over the line break, thereby actualizing its theme of constant movement. And second, that enjambment serves to throw especial attention onto the adverb “quickly.” The brief suspension caused by the line break in “written in wind and quickly / moving water” exposes the slipperiness of the relationship between verb and adverb, where “quickly” seems, initially, to apply to the verb “written” rather than as a qualifier for the “moving water” of the next line. The poet, it seems, must write quickly (in wind) of what his lover tells to him while also writing in water that is rapidly moving. Not only does this mark the impossibility for a poet of ever faithfully writing of love, or of inscribing faithfully his lover’s words, it seems also to diagnose a broader problem about the relationship between actions in and experiences of the world. Exploring this broader problem—the difficult coupling of actions and things—is one of the consequences of Creeley’s poetics of adultery. As we have seen, this problematic exploration emerges from the various couplings and miscouplings—of rhymes, repetitions, and lovers—that the poem performs and describes. It continues throughout the rest of the poem.

After the laying down of these themes in the poem’s first section, the speaker’s initial hesitancy is replaced by a more fluid sense of rhythm and by
more determined, end-stopped rhymes in the four subsequent “variations” on the Catullus original. These subsequent stanzas settle into a pattern of rhyming couplets (they are thus more “faithful” to Catullus’s original elegiac couplets), and the speaking voice in each successive section also becomes increasingly colloquial, as though Creeley is trying to test the limits of an off-hand, conversational, and spontaneous Beat argot. As with jazz players stepping up to take a solo on their particular instrument, each variation of Creeley’s poem presents a different voice riffing on the same theme:

2.
My old lady says I’m it,
she says nobody else cd ever make it.

But what my old lady says when pushed to it,—
well, that don’t make it.

3.
My old lady is a goof at heart,
she tells me she loves me, we’ll never part—

but what a goofed up chick will tell to a man
is best written in wind & water & sand.

4.
Love & money & a barrel of mud,
my old man gives out for stud,

comes home late from his life of sin,
now what do you think I should tell to him?

5.
We get crazy but we have fun,
life is short & life gets done,

time is now & that’s the gig,
make it, don’t just flip yr wig.

(Creeley 1982, 68–69)

The poem develops, therefore, by presenting us with a series of shifting poetic and vocal perspectives. While continuing to enact the poem’s theme of incon-
stancy and change, such shifts also allow Creeley to critique the initial pose and idiom adopted by the poem’s male lover. We see the lover’s possessiveness (signaled by “my love” in section 1 and “my old lady” in sections 2 and 3) being ironically and humorously countered by the woman’s perspective in section 4 (“my old man gives out for stud”), which is, in turn, replaced by a collective voice (“We get crazy but we have fun”) in the final variation, section 5. The act of variation, that is, pulls open the notion that the poem might be able to stay true to its original intentions. Precisely because Creeley writes the poem as a theme and set of variations he is able to investigate how a love poem might measure, or fail to measure, human relationships.

Similarly, though with different consequences, the poem’s rhyme words—signaling both repetition and variation—put the poem at the limits of what might be able to be articulated by the lover. The rhyming of “it” four times with itself in as many lines in section 2 puts so much pressure on this pronoun, and on the question of to what it might refer on each occasion, that the lover’s assertions collapse into all but nonsense. This sort of emptying out of the content of the poem by its gesturing to an absent referent might be seen as the result of, and the poem’s means of, interrogating its status as a translation. It also further develops Creeley’s opening up of a gap between a specific object of love—the poet-lover’s “love,” “old lady,” or “chick”—and a more general sense in which the poem is addressing itself to, or apostrophizing, an abstract concept of love itself—“My love.”

In section 4, the rhyme pattern further complicates the poem’s themes of adultery and of the gap between the abstract and the particular. Seen from the woman’s point of view (which itself complicates the poem’s act of translation) the couplet, “Love & money & a barrel of mud, / my old man gives out for stud,” is clearly critical of the male lover. Yet the specifics of that critique are blurred, one might say muddied, by the very means through which it is articulated. Rhyme and rhythm—instruments of feeling and affect—overpower these lines’ sense and meaning. Here the poem obeys its own, earlier, advice by writing of a lover’s infidelity (the presumed implication of “giv[ing] out for stud”) in “water & sand,” that is, in a “barrel of mud.” Mud, of course, is a mixture of both water and sand, so a barrel of mud represents the adulteration of both those elements. Here, then, these strong full-rhymes continue, by a sort of poetic sleight-of-hand, the theme of adultery, not by an emptying out of the content of the poem’s reference (as earlier) but by an overfilling of it, a barrel-full in a line packed with other big abstract nouns, “Love” and “money.” And in the second couplet, the slippery sexual morality of the man is measured poetically by a slant-rhyme—“sin” and “him”—in which poetic and domestic fidelity come under simultaneous scrutiny.
Two related and important aspects of the poem are at play here. First, the woman's exasperation with her lover in this section picks up on a sense of suppressed antagonism and violence that runs through the whole poem. Though Creeley describes section 1 as a “literal translation” of the Catullus original, the injunction that a lover's words “should be written in sand” and the use of the verb “push” in “who pushes her” do not appear in Catullus’s poem. These two additions add a sense of menace into the very way in which the lover describes his love. They signal his mistrust of his lover’s words, the coerciveness of forcing a lover to speak of their love, and suggest that the relationship is underpinned by physical violence. The poem’s “pushing” of the woman might well be seen as companion to its stomping and beating. In this case, Creeley seems to be investigating the ways in which misogyny is instrumentalized within beat poetics. Indeed the repetition of the imperative “should” in section 4 of the poem, but this time in the mouth of the woman and her rather exasperated (and dactylic) rhetorical question about her lover, “now what do you think I should tell to him?,” indicates the poem’s attempt to undercut the assumed power with which the poem’s male lover speaks.

And second, such a question resonates powerfully with the poem’s examination of miscommunication between lovers. In part this is because its rhythmic insistence leaves the very question open, in part because the question revolves around the gap between what lovers say, what they do, and what they tell to each other. Exploiting this gap—as it is set up in section 1 between a lover who “says / she loves me” and a mistrust of “what a woman tells / to a man”—is central to the poem’s development of its critique of how lovers act together. The speaker’s mistrust of his “old lady” is largely insinuated in section 2 because the use of the more passive-feeling verb “says,” whereas in sections 3 and 4 the more active “tells” indicates the perception, on the part of the speaker, of a possible intention to deceive (in section 3) or to “tell off” the aberrant lover (in section 4).

The play between telling and saying, then, both underscores the poem’s play of agency between its lovers and radiates outward to the reader and to our response to, and responsibility for, the poem before us (as is evident in the line “what do you think I should tell to him?”). Such poetic telling (and asking) cements the poem’s anxious ethical positioning, which is heard in its final “variation.” Here, human relationships are pitted not just against the ways and means through which we might tell them (and retell them as variations on an old poetic theme) but also against the ways in which they are played out in, and measured against, time and the things we might get done in time. If the phrase “life is short & life gets done” expresses a passive sense of agency in the face of life’s shortness, it is balanced by an injunction not simply to give
oneself up to time, but to “make” something (a poem, perhaps?) of it. But the balance here between a passive giving up of oneself to the way things are and an active making of something (“it”) out of things brought together by the poem is precariously measured by Creeley’s use of the ampersand in the final three variations. Tellingly, in section 5, this graphic device of verbal coupling replaces the “And” of section 1’s third line and sets up a kind of internal rhyme between, and within, lines 2 and 3 of this section. In each line, the ampersand (or, copula) marks a caesura. These lines seem to be saying, therefore, that any coupling—whether verbal, poetic, or sexual—must recognize the fracturing upon which it is predicated.

What I want to suggest, then, is that Creeley’s measure of things in this poem—via Catullus—is hardly a solid endorsement of a Beat aesthetics of giving oneself up to “IT” (as Sal and Dean famously do in On the Road), nor is it underpinned by the sort of Epicurean ataraxia that influences Catullus’s anti-Stoic thinking. So, although Kerouac’s “IT” remains an ambiguous concept, and thus only a partial measure of Beat thinking, the draw toward a “form of instant gratification, a thrill for the moment, an epiphany” that, according to Weinreich (1990, 54), it embodies is something that Creeley’s poetics resists. Creeley’s attention to things played, replayed, adulterated (rather than to a singular IT, a moment) sees the poem as a reality that is explored and into which he seeks to project meaning, as opposed to a reality that is transcended by, as Weinreich describes IT, “some form of isolated or radiating pleasure as a feeling and end in itself” (54). Creeley’s poetics, that is, marks as profoundly ambiguous many of the tropes of spontaneity and “being-in-the-moment” that are commonly felt to characterize Beat writing. The indeterminacy, therefore, that results from Creeley’s use of a jazz idiom in this poem, and of a theme and variations format, significantly undercuts its ostensibly “typical” Beat sensibility. The idioms of the poem’s final line—“make it, don’t just flip yr wig”—which sound very like those of a countercultural hipster, ring hollowly precisely because the earlier variations of the poem have demonstrated the provisionality of any single point of view. This impression is underscored by the increasingly stomping rhythms and resonant rhymes of the poem that pull forcibly against the sorts of subtlety and nuance that the poem has allowed to emerge earlier. What we witness here, at the end of the poem, are the ways in which it has effectively emptied itself out. Its pronouns are empty: to what, in fact, does the “it” refer?; is the poem about a real lover, or about Love itself?; is the object of its attention that lover, or Catullus’s original poem? The closing image of flipping one’s wig signals the poem’s anxious frustration at its inability to speak of, or tell convincingly, the condition of love. That condition is, like a wig, an empty sort of mask that
signifies the poetic disguises adopted by love poetry even as it seeks a poetic idiom to stop itself becoming adulterated.

As we have seen, the poem’s structure as a theme and variations forces attention onto its act of translation whereby one version of Catullus is placed alongside another. This sets up a key theme of movement, restlessness, transition, and change that, in turn, sets up a poetics of adultery as a key mode for Creeley of enquiring into the condition of ’50s America and into his position within “countercultural poetics.” The poem’s beat-ness (its riffing on jazzy sounds and rhythms) allows Creeley to interrogate what fidelity to self and nation, and to the avocation of being a poet might come to mean in such a turbulent cultural moment. And this sense of restlessness is, of course, a key theme for Beat writing more generally. However, the very form of the poem seems to cut against (as noted above) the assumed spontaneity of a Beat poetics, of the sort that Gair (2007, 38) has noted “most of the Beats preached (even if they did not practice),” and to proceed rather from an anxious poetics of hesitancy and a desire to examine closely—and then to reexamine—human and poetic relationships. The very measuredness of Creeley’s poem, then, both argues for him as a Beat poet and against it. It certainly points up the slipperiness of Beat notions of spontaneity, as discussed further by Matthew Pfaff in chapter 4 of this current volume. What we hear—despite its jazz idiom—is that the poem’s condition is not really one of improvisation, or of being-in-the-moment. It’s a poem that cares more about examining its very processes than about giving itself up to process. In effect the poem is interested in the contrast between what one “says” in the moment and what one “tells” of the moment. And interestingly, this contrast, which goes hand in hand with revaluations of the power of spontaneity as a defining trope of Beat expression, runs through revisionist accounts of the Beat experience such as, for example, Johnson and Grace’s (2002, 12–17) sense of how three different generations of Beat women commented back on the moment of the Beats via memoir and a developing feminist consciousness in the ’60s, ’70s and later; or Davidson’s reading (1998, 269) of the Beats, in retrospect, as “work[ing] strategically within [the mainstream] to develop an immanent critique.”

“Stomping with Catullus” exposes, therefore, the adulterous relationship between being in the moment and commenting on the moment, between language—poetic language—and experience. It troubles, therefore, at how Beat aesthetics might be read as enacting an immanent critique within—however ambiguously framed—doctrines of spontaneous composition. And it is this fact of the gap between saying and telling that illuminates Creeley’s poetics

12. See also Pfaff above in this volume.
of adultery and which provides him with a measure of what it means to be human, to have poetic agency. Creeley describes this sense in his essay, “A Sense of Measure,” when he notes,

I want to give witness not to the thought of myself—that specious concept of identity—but, rather, to what I am as simple agency, a thing evidently alive by virtue of such activity. I want, as Charles Olson says, to come into the world. Measure, then, is my testament. What uses me is what I use and in that complex measure is the issue. I cannot cut down trees with my bare hand, which is measure of both tree and hand. In that way I feel that poetry, in the very subtlety of its relation to image and rhythm, offers an intensely various record of such facts. It is equally one of them. (Creeley 1972, 34)

Creeley’s sense of measure, then, is that which allows him to make poetically meaningful the distance between the “thought of [him]self” and what he is “as simple agency,” an operation he investigates in his Catullus translations. And it is in this distance, I want to argue in this concluding section of the essay, that Creeley’s poethics are grounded. I want, now, therefore to draw out a little further the relation here between the thought of the thing and the thing itself (the relation that “Stomping with Catullus” opens out in its initial hesitation, “My love—my love says”) in order to examine how Creeley’s poetics of adultery provides just such an intense record of facts. And I also want to begin to show how Creeley’s poetic desire to “come into the world” has poethical bearing both on his work and, more widely, on the efforts of postwar American experimental poetry to epitomize a new “stance toward reality.” Initially I will examine how the relationship between thought and thing is related to the imagery of hands, and holding, that is prevalent in Creeley’s poetry. I will then, toward the essay’s conclusion, consider how Creeley’s poethics, and their resonances with Beat aesthetics, might be seen to emerge (via his dealings with Catullus) from Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura.*

In “Stomping with Catullus,” it is the hand that “pushes” and that attempts to write on wind, water, and sand. In another poem, “The Whip,” written at the same time as “Stomping with Catullus” and also published in the early collection *All that is Lovely in Men* (1955), the lover’s hand signifies a compromised ethics or, at least, sexual guilt.13 The act of a lover placing her hand on the poet’s back in this poem allows the poet to see the consequences of his giving up of himself to things. This hand is the measure of his poetics and of how he might come into the world as a human; it is the measure of how

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Creeley’s poetics of adultery might come to operate. The link between these two—the hand as a measure of the human and the hand as the sign of a poetics of adultery—is Heidegger. And it is clear that Creeley was aware of Heidegger’s meditations on poetic being as early as 1948. In a letter to Bob Leed of c. August 1948, he notes, “when Heidegger . . . says that nothingness is the constitutive structure of the existent my understanding of his words produces an activity that is desperate in the extreme” (Creeley 2014, 17).

Throughout Heidegger’s extended meditations upon Being (Dasein)—most especially in the first section of Being and Time—the hand plays a crucial figurative role. For him, the present-at-hand might be thought of as the way in which the world and its objects is (or seems to be) simply there, a disinterested ontological category that is distinct from human use.14 It is, as Jonathan Goldberg has noted, “an unthinking everydayness in which objects seem simply to be there as objects” (Goldberg 1990, 295). Heidegger’s point, though, would seem to be that the existence of things is never simply the result of an unthinking objectness.15 He argues, in fact, that the present-at-hand arises from the ready-to-hand, or that which is—like a tool—available for human use. Things are present-at-hand, therefore, according to Heidegger, not as the result of an essential category of being, but because of the usefulness, the “handiness,” of such things. Their Being depends upon their relation to the human in terms of use value or “in-handedness.” In this sense then, the hand is the measure of their mode of Being. In Creeley’s terms, the hand becomes the sign of the “complex measure” of the relation between “what uses me” and “what I use.” It signifies a bodily relation to the object world, in which the poem itself transforms unthinking everydayness to poetic use. Such thinking against the instrumentalization of the body and of (poetic) experience is a ground shared by a Beat sensibility (of breath poetics; spontaneous utterance; and a return to uncensored bodily experience) seeking escape from the conformities and containments of ’50s culture and by Heidegger’s existentialist-inflected meditations on Being. Creeley’s poetics—via its attempt to project meaning into its reality16—is an important bridge, therefore, between Heidegger’s thought and the Beats.

The crucial transformation of unthinking everydayness into the poetic—in which Creeley’s poethics is grounded—takes place in “The Whip.” The poem acts out a scene of guilty, adulterous, desire. The domestic everydayness of the poet’s love is here threatened by another love, one that is other, uncanny.

Noticeably in the first half of the poem, both women are unreadable signs, things toward which the poem addresses itself but which it can never fully encompass, much like the address to “my love” in “Stomping with Catullus.” Both the whiteness and flatness of the first woman, and the returning to the poet of the other woman on the roof in a “fit”—like a returning of the repressed—sees these women turned into monstrous signs of the poet’s inner turmoil. Though recalcitrant in their presence, they remain inscrutable.

I spent a night turning in bed
my love was a feather, a flat

sleeping thing. She was
very white

and quiet, and above us on
the roof, there was another woman I

also loved, had
addressed myself to in

a fit she
returned. That

encompasses it.
(Creeley 1982, 146)

Here, indeed, the first woman is made other not simply as an object in the poetic field—“a flat / sleeping thing”—but also in the description of her as a “feather.” This effectively delivers a sense of the dislocation of the world of things and of signs—though she is “a feather” she is also an unreadable sign, “white / and quiet.” Such a turning of the two women into signs of the poet’s desire seems echoed by the poem’s rhythmic turns, the syncopated music of its enjambed lines by which it measures the emotional space between the poet’s “turning” in bed and the second lover’s “return.” The poem’s title, and its difficult, hesitatingly articulated mistrust of, and desire for, its two women, clearly refers to Nietzsche’s description of woman as the “Whip.” But it also relocates Nietzsche’s misogyny into a problematic fantasy about power over the (dreaming) body, and the poem’s own relationship to the disciplinary structures of its own poetic embodiment as well as those of marital fidelity. It is beaten, that is, by the crippling dictates of ’50s conformity.
This can be seen most clearly in the moment when the poem turns on a gesture of the body, the “thing” beside him in bed. The unthinking everydayness of the poet's desire, his inarticulate relation to the things of his love, is transformed by a touch of the hand (a loving hand, not one wielding a whip). As a result of this intimate gesture, he can now, like the poem itself, and however “wrongly,” “think to say this.” The hand is the sign and the measure of this transformation. The hand, that is, signals the poem's investment in coupling as the act that defines its poetic measure of humanness (and, like “Stomping with Catullus” it is written in couplets):

But now I was
lonely, I yelled,

but what is that? Ugh,
she said, beside me, she put

her hand on
my back, for which act

I think to say this
wrongly.
(Creeley 1982, 146)

As with Creeley's act of translating Catullus, “The Whip” makes a claim upon the relationship between the idea of the lover's body and the actual thing that is the body. What this exposes as the act of Creeley's poetics is how a poem turns the world of things into signs (and thus exposes, or articulates, the gapped relation of the sign to the world). However, unlike “Stomping with Catullus,” “The Whip” performs a counter movement whereby touch is healing, that which restores us to the world of things, rather than an empty poetic grasping at wind, sand, and moving water. “The Whip” can therefore be read as a poetic coming into the world because of its mediation between the thought it articulates and the things of its articulation. And, as we have seen, it is the corporeal (with the hand as its sign) that enacts this poetic transformation between thought and things (between, we might say, the present-at-hand and the ready-to-hand). The work of Creeley's poetics, then, is the pattern it makes out of its thinking to say things wrongly. But, of course, saying things wrongly is the originating condition for a poetics of adultery.

The sort of poetic thinking, as witnessed in these two Creeley poems, thus complicates, as discussed earlier, the “first thought, best thought” dictum of
Beat poetics because these are poems that attend to the act of making the poem sound, where what the poem says and what it tells may, uncomfortably, sit wrongly together. With this in mind I want to move toward a close by briefly thinking a little more about this giving up of oneself to the nature of things that Creeley’s poetics investigates, and about another pattern of imagery—of rain and water—that “Stomping with Catullus” introduces into its investigation of the poetic conditions of being a Beat writer. This is less, perhaps, by way of a conclusion than it is an attempt to open up a few broader suggestions and examples of how a Beat aesthetics might be seen to resonate with the classics.

What I want to suggest is that the ways in which Creeley’s—and Beat—poetics seeks to assert a relationship toward the things of the world finds some interesting parallels in Lucretius’s De Rerum Natura. An interesting light—especially in terms of the poetics of the New American Poetry and Creeley’s articulation of it—can be thrown on such parallels by Joan Retallack’s notion of poetry’s ethical force, the “poetical wager” it undertakes, in its assertion of a poem’s investigation of our being-in-the-world. To give oneself up to the onslaught—the push, the beat, or the whip—of things, while it might be seen as a key Beat condition, is also the basis of Lucretius’s Epicurean thinking. This is hardly surprising given the shared Epicureanism of Catullus and Lucretius, and the freedom principle and bohemianism that runs through these classical poets and the Beats. Indeed, Lucretius’s discussion of things as atomistic and nature as ethical can be seen at play throughout “Stomping with Catullus” and “The Whip” and therefore provides a clue to reading Creeley’s troubled negotiation of Beat aesthetics via his poetics of adultery.

As Lucretius has it, atoms are in constant motion throughout the void of the universe, continually borne downward by their own weight. They are like raindrops falling, asserts Lucretius, and it is only because of their restless motion and their swerving from their straight path downward “in endless motion through the mighty void” that things can come into being (Lucretius 2.121–22; trans. 1997, 39). Nature, that is, results from collision, from the blows—or one might say, the beating—of one atom against another. For Retallack, Lucretius’s description of the swerves and collisions of atoms as they “fall downwards like raindrops through the profound void” provide her with an image of how a poetics comes to operate. The “poetical wager”—as she terms it—depends upon such “swerves,” which have “made everything happen yet could not be predicted or explained” (Retallack 2003, 2). Such swerves are, we might say,

adulterous: through their unexpected collisions and changes of motion they deviate from a straight path. In this sense, then, Retallack’s notion of the poethical swerve sees nature itself, poetic making, our being-in-the-world as predicated upon a poetics of adultery in which ethical responsibility inheres in the beat of one thing in nature against another. This means that for Retallack, the poethical wager entails a “certain poetics of responsibility with the courage of the swerve [that is] necessary to dislodge us from reactionary allegiances and nostalgias” (3).

Thought of in these terms, and seen through the lens of Catullus, Lucretius, and the Epicureanism they share, Creeley’s poethics thus delivers a sense of the poem as a space in which to act (ethically) and the world in which it acts as an open field, an environment of ongoing, interacting engagements. The beat, or rhythm, of things and of the poem as a measure of the world we inhabit, the touch of a hand as the measure of the difficulty of human relations in—and with—the world are part, therefore, of Creeley’s poethical wager. While the ongoings and “courage” of Creeley’s poetics are profoundly engaged with Beat aesthetics, his poetry can be seen to extend beyond this in its relationship to Olson’s notion of open field, or projective, verse—of the poem as an environment in which we act—and which underpins the new “stance toward reality” of the New American poetics. What this means is that the poethical trajectory of Creeley’s poetics pushes beyond Beat understandings of the world as an implacable force against which humans are pitted because of the poetic attention he gives to “the kinetics of the thing.”

What this means is that the poethical trajectory of Creeley’s poetics pushes beyond Beat understandings of the world as an implacable force against which humans are pitted because of the poetic attention he gives to “the kinetics of the thing.” The nature of things in Creeley’s work—adulterous—and his poetic stance toward them—ethically tested—thus leads to a poetics in which a sense of measure pervades our being-in-the-world. For Creeley, the poem is an affective—and thus poethical—space. This links back to Catullus whose description by Julia Gaisser sounds uncannily like a description of Creeley: his poetry, she notes, “presents a complicated emotional landscape” in which “the poet places himself in the centre of a world of friends, enemies, lovers and other poets, where the highest values are personal and aesthetic” (Gaisser 2001, xxv, xxvii).

In conclusion, then, what is especially interesting in Lucretius’s atomistic swerve, and in Retallack’s use of this in her delineation of the poethical wager, is the imagery of rainfall and water it employs. Writing on water, as we have seen, is a key trope in Creeley’s Catullus poem. It comes—unsurpris-

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20. Olson describes the projective poem as concerned with “the kinetics of the thing” (ibid., 240). Wrighton 2010 examines the concept of a “poethical trajectory” in “certain strands of twentieth-century American poetry” (1–2). It is within this “trajectory”—broader in scope than most accounts of Beat aesthetics—that I am seeking to locate Creeley’s work.
ingly—to express a sense of transience not only in human relationships, and
the relation of one poet to another over the centuries, but also in the nature
of things as they are, against which one is pitted. The “quickly / moving water”
of Creeley’s poem is the implacable force under which one is beaten down. It
is also, therefore, his poethical ground. And this imagery recurs throughout
Beat writing as can be seen in the following indicative examples. At the start of
the version of Gary Snyder’s poem “Night Highway Ninety-Nine” that appears
in Ann Charter’s Portable Beat Reader, we encounter a narrator who is on the
move, hitching out of town. He is a figure for whom naming and raining come
together to define the restlessness of the Beat experience and environment:
“Too cold and rainy to go out on the Sound / Sitting in Ferndale drinking cof-
fee” (Snyder 1992, 293). What is of interest here is the way in which the poem
absorbs the various people (and their precarious experiences as archetypical
Beat characters on the road) it goes on to describe into the very landscape it
sees them traversing. At one point in the poem, a parenthetical detail about
a part-time jobber who disappears into that landscape, seemingly recovered
later, dead, from the river, asserts a weary, beat resignation to the way things
simply are. His watery fate encapsulates the poem’s Beat weariness, one in
which raindrops, atoms, things, people are all seen as drifting in the void.

Throughout On the Road, too, Sal’s promise of the West, the search for
“IT” is oftentimes undercut by rainfall—torrential, drenching, fateful. Rain
acquires a mythical status in Kerouac’s novel, allowing Sal to assert a primal
beat sensibility. He is described as the great beat goof who is abandoned to,
and alone in, the wilderness of the rainy American night:

I’d been poring over maps of the United States in Paterson for months. . . .
Five scattered rides took me to the desired Bear Mountain Fridge, where
Route 6 arched in from New England. It began to rain in torrents when I
was let off there. . . . Not only was there no traffic but the rain came down in
buckets and I had no shelter. I had to run under some pines to take cover;
this did no good; I began crying and swearing and socking myself on the
head for being such a damn fool. (Kerouac 1957, 15)

But at the heart of such abandon is, for Kerouac, a search for joy—as in Dean’s
pop-eyed awe at hearing George Shearing play one rainy night that is the
“myth of the rainy night” (122). And so I want to recall Kerouac’s description
of the Beat generation in Playboy in 1959. Despite all the connotations for Ker-
ouac of being beat—of being exhausted, pushed to it, despairing—the basis
for the Beat generation is for him a quest for joyousness. He writes, “There
is no doubt about the Beat Generation . . . being a swinging group of new
American men intent on joy” (Kerouac 1979, 359). According to Hadot (1995, 225), Lucretius's sense of the nature of things is one suffused (maybe “soaked”) with a sense of Epicurean “joy and serenity . . . in the moment.” In this sense, the beats might be seen to riff in a jazz idiom off the Epicureanism—the anti-Stoicism—of poets such as Lucretius and Catullus. But how, then, does Creeley’s poetics—that I’ve characterized more as one of anxiety and hesitation—play off against the aim of Epicurean philosophy to help one live happily? As Ronald Melville has noted, “Epicurus aimed to give men peace of mind, what he called ataraxia, “being undisturbed” (Lucretius 1997, xvii).

Creeley’s poetics of adultery pulls against this. He is perhaps less Beat, then, in the sense of an intention of joy, than in his recognition that the nature of things is something that beats us down, rains down on us. Thus the imagery of water and rainfall he frequently employs becomes a fascinating one in terms of his negotiation of the Epicurean and poethical possibilities of a Beat poetics. Through such imagery, Creeley figures the adulterating force of things against which a poem might set its process of thinking. His poem, “The Rain,” provides a fitting conclusion, then, as it seems to epitomize his attempt to square up to the condition of the beat and to exemplify his poetics of adultery:

All night the sound had
come back again,
and again falls
this quiet, persistent rain.

What am I to myself
that must be remembered,
insisted upon
so often? Is it

that never the ease,
even the hardness,
of rain falling
will have for me

something other than this,
something not so insistent—
am I to be locked in this
final uneasiness.

Love, if you love me,
Lie next to me.
Be for me, like rain,
the getting out

of the tiredness, the fatuousness, the semi—
lust of intentional indifference.
Be wet
with a decent happiness.

“The Rain” starts with sound and rhythm, the beating of rain on his roof; examines (in typical Creeley fashion) his existential angst, his unease, about his place within a universe of things and words (“what am I to myself / that must be remembered, / insisted upon / so often?”), and about the fidelity of lovers (“Love, if you love me, / lie next to me” [emphasis added]); and ends intent on joy. The poem’s “semi-lust,” its lovers lying to—and next to—each other, its intentional indifferences, and its blurring of things (their adulteration by being left out in the rain) are all coordinates of Creeley’s adulterous poetics. The “decent happiness” with which the poem ends provides, finally—and because its affirmation is so troublingly downbeat—Creeley’s measure of how far his poetics swerves from those Beat and classical models that he translates, improvises on, and turns into his own set of variations.

Bibliography


21. Creeley 1982, 207. This poem was written “Sept 15, 1959” and first published in The Nation 1959, 363. See Novik 1973, 92. It was subsequently published in Creeley 1962, the collection that included “Stomping with Catullus” and “The Whip.”


