Radical Brothers-in-Arms

GAIUS AND HANK AT THE RACETRACK

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si qui forte mearum ineptiarum
lectores eritis manusque uestras
non horrebitis admouere nobis . . .

if, oh readers, there is anyone who will
bravely touch my ramblings with their
own hands and not tremble . . .
—CATULLUS, FRAGMENT 14B

be self-taught.
—CHARLES BUKOWSKI, “NO LEADERS, PLEASE”

Charles Bukowski’s poetic relationship with Catullus has received negligible
attention from scholars, yet it provides significant insights into the recep-
tion of ancient verse by the Beats and their contemporaries. Bukowski’s
Catullus poems reveal intimate and personal readings and reworkings to
articulate his own place in the world, often matching the poet’s protestations
of masculinity expressed through aggression and the grotesque. This chapter
examines Bukowski’s poetic solidarity with Catullus in terms of the concept of
contubernalis in the Catullan sense, a brother-in-arms, a fellow traveler, and a
peer. Catullus uses the term in Carmen 37 ostensibly to attack, but he does so
cognizant of its traditional meaning (tent-companion or comrade) in order
to underscore his awareness of the ties that bind him to the plethora of lovers
surrounding Lesbia at the salax taberna.1 He uses a similar expression in Car-
men 11, comites Catulli, of Furius and Aurelius, playing on the standard mean-

1. On the use of contubernalis in Carmen 37, see Johnson 1999.
ing of *comes* (companion or comrade) in a poem that informs us intratextually of the irony implicit in this particular instance.²

Unlike Allen Ginsberg, Bukowski did not read Latin,³ but he read and related to Catullus via the pages of an English translation.⁴ His treatment of Catullus reflects an implicit simpatico with him that in turn translates into a Bukowskian dialogue with the poet.⁵ In “what have I seen?” Catullus is directly addressed and ridiculed yet simultaneously lauded in a poem that channels the poet’s playfully vitriolic voice (particularly *Carmen 6*). In “red up and down” and “the love poems of Catullus” in which the poet is not spoken to, but rather spoken about, the complexity of the intellectual and emotional bond is as equally strong. A less direct treatment is seen in “to the whore who stole my poems” in which Bukowski impersonates Catullus via *imitatio*. In each of the three approaches to Catullus—direct address, direct reference, and less obvious but specifically imitation-based composition—Bukowski establishes and reaffirms a bond between himself and Catullus, albeit grudgingly at times. He casts Catullus as his own Furius or Aurelius; his *contubernalis*, the object of ridicule and attack but also affection and admiration, depending on context and state of mind.

Before considering the relationship between the two poets, it is wise to address whether or not Bukowski can be classified as a Beat and, if so, what type of Beat. There is, of course, debate about whether or not Bukowski should be identified as a Beat writer. In fact, it could be argued that he does not belong to any creative enclave and is better situated as the artist-as-outsider.

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². See *Carmen 16* for Catullus’s most aggressive attack on Furius and Aurelius.
³. On Ginsberg’s radically egalitarian approach to the classical canon, and also on his own translations of Catullus, see Pfaff in this volume.
⁴. It is uncertain what edition(s) Bukowski read. Bukowski owned almost no books, apart from editions of his own works, and used the public library as a young man, but less so later on (correspondence from Sue Hodson, Curator of Literary Manuscripts, The Huntington Library). However, in “red up and down” he mentions that the woman “walked out and sat on / my porch and read my copy / of Catullus” (1977, 14–16), clearly an indication he did have a copy, possibly his own. For the sake of convenience, Whigham’s translation is used (except for the author’s translation of *fr. 14b* and *Carmen 41.1*). The Latin text is from Catullus 1958.
⁵. This chapter positions Bukowski’s treatment of Catullus outside debates surrounding autobiographical versus nonautobiographical readings of the poet. Such debates are anachronistic in relation to Bukowski’s treatments of Catullus’s verse because they do not surface in Catullan scholarship until the late 1980s (and elite literary criticism was antithetical to Bukowski’s artistic creed, anyway). If pressed to take a position on how Bukowski understood Catullus’s poems within such a paradigm, however, one may suggest that he read them as artistic artifacts as attested by his own reworkings of them combined with his own reinventions of Catullus’s poetic persona. On the issue of identity, subjectivity, autobiography, and autobiographical fallacy in the poems of Catullus (an exhaustive scholarly enquiry), see Wray 2001 and also Gaisser 2009 for concise discussions.
The dissonance between Bukowski and the Beats is, essentially, one of his own making. Bukowski discusses his distaste for the Beats on numerous occasions, as illustrated in a letter to Jon Webb (c. October 1, 1962):

Now, the original Beats, as much as they were knocked, had the Idea. But they were flanked and overwhelmed by fakes, guys with nicely clipped beards, lonely-hearts looking for free ass, lime-lighters, rhyming poets, homosexuals, bums, sightseers—the same thing that killed the Village. Art can’t operate in Crowds. (Cooney 2007, 31).6

This excerpt shows Bukowski’s unease with categorization and his intense dislike of belonging. His outsider status7 protected his sense of identity and his creative process, and to preserve them, he could not be a part of any crowd, artistic or otherwise. Such sentiments are further voiced, indeed intensified, in later correspondence with Webb and his wife, Louise (December 7, 1963):

The beats through their artefact of so-called brawny and courageous poetics did more damage to the pure poem trying to breathe than Poetry Chicago has done accepting the accepted. The trouble with the BEATS: they gathered in crowds to gather SOLACE and when you take the gang-form you become the gang. (ibid., 96).8

If we take Bukowski’s word for it, then, he was not, is not a Beat writer. Nevertheless, if we remove him from the classification process, he was and still is considered a Beat writer. Through his publishing relationship with the Webbs during the 1960s, most notably in relation to the magazine, Outsider, Bukowski was printed alongside Lawrence Ferlinghetti, William Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg. In 1972, City Lights published his first collection of short stories, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness, and he read at City Lights’ Poet Theatre during the 1970s. This fluid association with the Beat movement, most strongly observed in Bukowski’s links with publishers, thereby suggests a connection, even if he did not. There is also his interactions with the Beats, particularly, albeit briefly, Neal Cassady, “one of the few beat figures he admired” (Sounes 2000, 91) and his extensive correspondence with the “Queen of the Beats,” Sheri Martinelli, another publisher of his early works.

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7. Bukowski was voted Outsider of the Year by Outsider magazine in 1962.
Additionally, Bukowski’s poetry, although highly individualistic, reflects the free verse, performativity and anti-authoritarian energy of the Beats.9 But in terms of subject matter and lifestyle, he is not intimately part of their coterie, particularly as they themselves structured it. As Paul Clements suggests, Bukowski is part of the “outsider beat literature”10 and, more importantly, a “materialist beat,” a term Paul Whiston uses in relation to both Bukowski and Cassady. Whiston’s emphasis here is on the literal meaning of “beaten down” as a cultural and social reality as opposed to the “spiritual beatific notion” of mysticism and vatic ecstasy11 of bohemian Beats such as Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, even Bob Dylan. In this literary and cultural classification of Bukowski’s life and oeuvre within a more nuanced understanding of the Beat movement, we detect the interconnections and disconnections between him and its leading lights. Unlike some of them, Bukowski sourced no inspiration from professors and belonged to no university alumni. His was not a world of Columbia connections or any other academic ties; his institutional ties, if any, were to the post office. In this we see an emphasis on Bukowski as the “materialist beat;” the man who loathed the job and the institution that provided it, but who, nevertheless, had to work to sustain a livelihood in order to write. Rather than idealizing or even fetishizing the avant-garde rebellion against the American Dream via a championing of a free, itinerant, anti-establishment lifestyle that nurtured expression and insight, Bukowski lived that life through lack of choice, thereby embodying a Beat ideal, but never valorizing it. The American Dream rejected Bukowski long before he had the option to reject it himself.

The idea of Bukowski as an “outsider” Beat, a “materialist” Beat, is also in evidence in his approach to Catullus. In “what have I seen?”12 Bukowski speaks directly to Catullus, admiring him while simultaneously modernizing him:

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9. For the influence of the Beats on Bukowski’s writing, see Clements 2013, 71–72.
10. Clements 2013, 6. For an insightful and early appraisal of Bukowski’s outsider status, including a contrast to the Beats, see Rexroth 1964.
11. Clements 2013, 6, and Whiston 2000. Applying a Marxist reading of the Beats, Whiston argues that the lifestyles of Bukowski and Cassady, defined by social, cultural, and economic oppression that involved regular itinerancy, job-seeking, and hardship, were the catalysts for the Beat movement. This lived experience extended to the subject matter of Bukowski’s writing and desired readership: “My genius stems from an interest in whores, workingmen, street-car drivers—lonely, beaten-down people. And those are the people I’d like to see reading my stuff, and I don’t want to see too many learned comments, too much criticism, or too much praise get between me and them” (Bukowski in Blunden 2003, 166).
12. This version is from the manuscript dated June 28, 1979, and matches with one exception (“this great whale”), the audio recording of the poem during a reading at Sweetwater, Redondo Beach, California, in 1980 (released in 1994 under the title Hostage). For the published version, see Bukowski 2009, 110.
I like your way, Catullus, talking about the
whore who claims you owe her money, or
that guy who smiled too much—must have cleaned
his teeth with piss, or how about the poets
come with their blameless tame verse, or about
how this guy married a slut.
(Bukowski 1979, 1–6)

In the poem’s second stanza, he both contemporizes and humiliates Catullus, making him a peer, a fellow punter at the racetrack:

you come right out and say things,
you’re not like the others; but listen, Catullus,
didn’t I see you at the racetrack bar last
Thursday? you had a great whale of a cunt
with you, must have scaled 190, one breast flopped
loose, dressed in a lavender sheet, I believe I heard
her pass wind in public—her teeth green, her buttocks
of sagging celluloid, and you drunk and pawing into
her anus . . .
surely that was not you, Catullus, at the racetrack
bar last Thursday?
(7–17)

Composed with a tonal mixture of admiration and mockery, “what have I seen?” shows a powerful intimacy between the two poets as Catullus is cast as Bukowski’s *comes*, a “pal” he enjoys catching-out at the racetrack. The success of the poem, its tone, and content are reliant on Bukowski’s familiarity with the Catullan oeuvre. Also necessary to poetic success is Bukowski’s understanding of Catullus’s direct, harsh honesty when it comes to vituperation and his liking for everyday, overtly untraditional subject matter as befitting the artistic creed of the *neoterics*. In stanza one, Bukowski references the Egnatius poems (*Carmen* 37 and *Carmen* 39), one of the two Ameana poems (*Carmen* 41) and the poem to Flavius (*Carmen* 6). As for his inclusion of “the poets” . . . “with their blameless tame verse” (4, 5),13 his reference is more oblique and more interpretive, alluding to Catullus’s occasional digs at bad verse and bad practitioners (men such as Caesius, Aquinus, and Suffenus, all of whom are mentioned in *Carmen* 14; Suffenus, again, in *Carmen* 22).

13. Perhaps an allusion to the Beat poets.
Bukowski’s main theme in this poem, as signposted above, is twofold: admiration for the poet and mocking imitation of one of the poet’s tropes, namely ridicule of someone he knows, someone in, out, or on the periphery of his “set,” namely Flavius’s girlfriend from Carmen 6. This dual theme is handled with sophistication and verve via Bukowski’s use of imitation as a poetic weapon turned on the poet himself in order to augment, ironically, the compliment of imitation. Catullus in this sense becomes the object of his own vituperative style in a modern homage to him. Thus, as Catullus is praised in the line, “you come right out and say things” (7), he is exposed by Bukowski who copies the same technique by coming right out and saying things. As Catullus laughs and exposes Flavius for hiding a girlfriend who is suspected of being “as unattractive as / (doubtless) she is unacceptable” (Carmen 6.2–3), he in turn is laughed at for avoiding Bukowski “at the racetrack bar last / Thursday” (9–10) because of an embarrassing girlfriend, namely “the great whale of a cunt” (10). This line, its vocabulary and imagery further exemplifies Bukowski’s echoing of Catullus as illustrated in his additional attempts to demean Flavius via his girlfriend: “You are wrapped up with a whore to end all whores / and ashamed to confess it” (Carmen 6.5–6). Bukowski, however, extends the insult via allusions to other poems in the Catullan corpus that ridicule enemies. For examples principally featuring women, we have Lesbia in Carmen 11.18 holding three hundred adulterers in her “embrace”; Ameana described as “that utterly fucked-out girl” in Carmen 41.1; and Rufa who “sucks-off” someone called “little-Rufus” and who scavenges around graveyards, stealing from pyres in Carmen 59. Bukowski, the “beaten down” Beat, is drawn to the low-life cast members of Catullus’s poetic dramas, seeing in them, perhaps, the down-and-out men and women of Los Angeles who were neighbors, coworkers, gamblers, sex workers, and drunks.

This image of Bukowski as a “materialist beat,” illustrated in “what have I seen?” is accentuated when we consider a poem by Ginsberg that also pays homage to a poetic hero. In “A Supermarket in California” (1956), Ginsberg imagines watching Walt Whitman shop for groceries. Different to the direct and blunt nature of Bukowski, who sees and speaks to Catullus, Ginsberg

17. Author’s translation.
18. On “A Supermarket in California,” see Dickey in this volume (19); Dickey offers a different reading of the supermarket setting, regarding it as “mundane” (20) rather than my “middle-class.”
19. I owe this comparison between the two poets to Leni Johnson.
estabishes an artificial reverie to signpost that the encounter is not real or personal but imaginary and impossible:

In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!

(Ginsberg 1956, “A Supermarket in California,” para. 2)

Unlike the implied relationship revealed in Bukowski’s address to Catullus, Ginsberg and Whitman are not “buddies,” not comites, but share a student–master connection in the eyes of the student alone. The middle-class setting of the supermarket distinguishes Ginsberg’s Beat world from that of Bukowski’s racetrack:

. . . Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!—and you, Garcia Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?

(para. 3)

The inclusion of Lorca amid the families is unorthodox and surprising; nevertheless, it too contributes to the markedly different world of Ginsberg and Bukowski. Not all, perhaps not many, of Bukowski’s readers were familiar with Catullus yet this is of no consequence in terms of the poem’s success. Bukowski simply talks to Catullus as he would to any other friend he spies in an embarrassing situation and wishes to mock. In contrast, Lorca is introduced as a poetic conceit that requires the reader to recognize the reference and juxtapose the poet to Whitman as two of Ginsberg’s poetic and homosexual heroes. Walking with Whitman, passing Lorca and the families, Ginsberg’s night-time supermarket is romantic; a world of poets, beautiful grocery boys, and a farewell image of Whitman disembarking Charon’s boat and standing “on the black waters of Lethe” (32). This is in stark contrast to Bukowski’s image of a drunken Catullus mauling a farting woman’s anus at a racetrack in a poem stripped bare of classical adornment. Such a contrast—with an important echo (“I saw you, Walt Whitman” [10] / “but listen, Catullus, / didn’t I see you” [8–9])—leaves a hint that Bukowski knew Ginsberg’s poem and isn’t just mocking Catullus.

This difference is evidenced further when we compare Ginsberg’s “Malest Cornifici Tuo Catullo” (1958) and Bukowski’s Catullus poems. In 1955 Ginsberg was reading and translating Catullus and this poem, an adaptation of

21. Raskin 2005, 150–51. See also Pfaff in this volume on Ginsberg’s work on Catullus’s verse.
Carmen 38 and addressed to Kerouac, is, like “A Supermarket in California,” a polished, witty, self-consciously educated homage that captures the jouissance of Catullus when all is well with Lesbia or Juventius:

I’m happy, Kerouac, your madman Allen’s
finally made it: discovered a new young cat,
and my imagination of an eternal boy
walks on the streets of San Francisco,
handsome, and meets me in cafeterias
and loves me.
(Ginsberg 1958, “Malest Cornifici Tuo Catullo,” 1–6)

Ginsberg’s Latin, signposted in the title, establishes him as an aficionado, as one trained to mimic the poet in a “scholarly,” innovative way. Ginsberg’s confident handling of the material is most overtly revealed in his style of replication: Ginsberg imitates Catullus by becoming Catullus.

“Malest Cornifici Tuo Catullo” is markedly different from Bukowski’s Catullus poems. As a Latin-less reader, Bukowski could not title his poems in Latin, as Ginsberg did, nor could he echo Latin words or phrases. He overcame such hurdles, however, by amalgamating Catullan themes and imagery to write poems free from creative anxieties concerning the original language or a misguided imperative to capture linguistic fidelity. Such multipoem layering is evident in Bukowski’s imitation of Catullus’s poems about thieves in his “to the whore who took my poems”:

some say we should keep personal remorse from the poem,
stay abstract, and there is some reason in this,
but jesus;
twelve poems gone and I don’t keep carbons and you have my
paintings too, my best ones; it’s stifling:
are you trying to crush me out like the rest of them?
why didn’t you take my money? they usually do
from the sleeping drunken pants sick in the corner.

22. As discussed by Pfaff herein, Ginsberg (at times) liked to reject the stuffiness associated with traditional classics (prosody, for example). However, it is important to note that Ginsberg had the luxury of rejecting this elite tradition while at the same composing works that referenced his familiarity with it. The Beats’ communion with antiquity is as much about class and, inextricably, education as it is about poetic aesthetics.
next time take my left arm or a fifty
but not my poems.
(Bukowski 1963, 1–12)

Bukowski laments the theft of his poetry and some of his best paintings, thereby joining Catullus in his own rants about thieves. In *Carmen* 12, Catullus rails against Asinius, a thief who employs similar strategies to Bukowski’s whore, namely theft when his companions are drunk; and in *Carmen* 25, he attacks Thallus who made off with his cloak, napkins and writing tablets. It is *Carmen* 42, however, that is the main source of Bukowski’s *imitatio*. Herein Catullus sends out his hendecasyllables to chase the whore who stole his writing tablets. Catullus’s poem is more aggressive than Bukowski’s condemnation: Catullus’s thief is a whore (*moecha*) (employed five times), the word intensified by the use of the adjectives ugly (*turpis*) (3) and rotten or fetid (*pudita*) (11, 12, 19, 20).²³ Catullus continues to pile on the invectives: she strides with an ugly gait (*turpe incedere*) (8), laughs farcically and offensively (*mimice ac moleste / ridentum*) (8–9) with the mouth of a Gallic whelp (*catuli ore Gallicarni*), is filth (*lutum*) (13), not only a whore but the whorehouse itself (*lupanar*) (13) and, finally, a bitch (*canis*) (17). In fact, *Carmen* 42 is closer to Bukowski’s “what have I seen?” in its squalid imagery of womanhood; in “to the whore who took my poems,” he prefers to deride the woman via an emphasis on her actions and their effects rather than on her grotesqueness. Nevertheless, both are motivated by their belief in poetry as a means of exacting revenge and humiliation. Poetry as personal and cathartic is a consistent device throughout both poets’ oeuvres, uniting them as brothers-in-arms—literally, in the thief poems—as they arm-up, sharpen their pens, and rail against the world.

In “the love poems of Catullus,” Bukowski (2003, 177–78) writes a homage to the poet and the genre of the love poem itself:

she read his poems
she read them to the men waiting in her bed
then tore them up
laughing
and fell on the bed
opening her legs to the nearest convenient cock.

²³. Literally an “adulteress,” but with the colloquial meaning of “whore.” Whigham (1966) translates Catullus’s Latin as “slippery whore” (*moecha turpis* [3]) and “unwholesome whore” (*moecha putida*, 11, 12, 19, 20).
but Catullus continued to write love
poems to her
as she fucked slaves in back
alleys, and
when they were together
she robbed him while he was
drunk,
mocked his verse and his
love,
pissed on his
floor.
(Bukowski 2003, 1–18)

The subject here is not only Catullus but Lesbia, the poet’s principal object of
desire. The two of them vie for Bukowski’s attention as he defends the poet
and damns his unworthy muse. Unlike the intimate brutality of “what have I
seen?” here there is sensitivity toward the poet:

Catullus was like
most poets:
I understand
and forgive as I
re-read him.
(32–36)

Here is Bukowski at his introspective best; guard down, sentimental but, like
Catullus, always in control of his craft. The heavy-handed slang and conversa-
tional style are still there but directed to express a different emotional and
poetic energy; the defense of his artistic comrade, not his humiliation. The
grotesqueness of the poem is linked to Lesbia.

The poem reflects three concerns on Bukowski’s part: his imitation of
Catullus’s style to express his own views on Lesbia; his meditations on Catullus
as a poet he knows, understands and forgives; and his biographical readings
of the lives of both Catullus and his puella. Bukowski’s treatment of Lesbia
matches Catullus’s hostile poems addressed to her. He presents her as equally
whorish as her original lover does, emphasizing her utter unworthiness as a
muse via the image of her reading the love poems of Catullus to the men in
her bed, laughing at them, then tearing them up. Bukowski’s fidelity to Catul-
lus’s account of the affair is evidenced in the references to her multiple lov-
ers (Carmen 11, Carmen 37), to her “fuck[ing] slaves in back / alleys” (10–11;
see *Carmen* 58), and to her mockery of his love (*Carmen* 83). Bukowski also includes roughly comparable incidents from his own life—being robbed when he was drunk\textsuperscript{24} and being with women who piss themselves\textsuperscript{25}—but ascribes them to Catullus’s experiences with Lesbia. This intrusion of his own experiences with women unites the two poets, valorizes their craft of love poetry despite its apparent futileness, and “pits” them against the world of women.

Such works operate as a testimony to their tenacity as poets, persisting in the composition of pointless love poems to faithless woman. This bond of intimacy is accentuated by Bukowski, who ends his poem with a biographical reading of the lives of Catullus and Lesbia. But here he seems to have made a spectacular error by conflating Lesbia with Sappho. Catullus, an ardent imitator of Sappho, named his mistress Lesbia in honor of her place of origin, Lesbos. But this conceit seems to have bypassed Bukowski\textsuperscript{26} because he mentions that Lesbia committed suicide, thus mistaking her for the Sappho of the faux biographies of antiquity and later:\textsuperscript{27}

Catullus who
otherwise
wrote brilliant poems
faltered under the spell of this wench who it is said as she grew old fled from him begat a new life upon a far isle where she ended up a

\textsuperscript{24} As in “to the whore who took my poems.”

\textsuperscript{25} Pissing occurs comparatively regularly in Bukowski’s writing; usually associated with him being drunk, but also associated with women; on the latter, see, “who the hell is tom jones?” (1977), “Piss” (1996), and the scene involving Lydia in *Women* (1978). Catullus also uses piss as vitriolic metaphor; see *Carmen* 37, *Carmen* 39, and *Carmen* 97. See Worman (2008, 234): “This obnoxious (and often anxious) emphasis on bodily appetites and urges has one of its important continuations . . . in the prose and poetry of male writers of the mid twentieth century. Poets like . . . Ginsberg and Charles Bukowski . . . reintroduced the rude comedy of the body into lyric form.”

\textsuperscript{26} This is an unusual error in view of the fact that Bukowski read Sappho and should have been aware of the distinction between the real poet and Lesbia. On Sappho and the avant-garde of 1960s New York, see Skerl in this volume.

\textsuperscript{27} See Ovid, *Heroides* 15.
But maybe he didn't get it wrong but deliberately adopted the fake story of Sappho's death by suicide as a particularly fitting end for Lesbia—a poetic fantasy, a wishful death-as-punishment for the wrongs she committed against Catullus. Bukowski ends the poem by chronicling Catullus's biography, and here he may have intended a reference to *Carmen 76*, one of Catullus's most powerful poems, in which he presents himself as unwell and fatigued, but with poetic faculties fully charged, ruminating on his life, his health, and Lesbia:

he knew
as death approached
that it's
better to start out with a
strumpet than to end up
with one.
(37–41)

In “red up and down,” Bukowski (1977, 171–72) describes another episode in a long line of meaningless yet meaningful encounters with women:

red hair
real
she whirled it
and she asked
“is my ass still on?”

such comedy.

there is always one woman
to save you from another

and as that woman saves you
she makes ready to
destroy.

“sometimes I hate you,”
she said.
she walked out and sat on
my porch and read my copy
of Catullus, she stayed out
there for an hour.

(1–17)

Bukowski frames this snapshot of life within the context of his copy of Catullus, a physical, potent memento he possesses, which leads him to meditate on the poet as he recalls an afternoon with a beautiful woman who is “red up and down.” The pun of the title captures the woman’s ambivalence toward Bukowski as well as her inherent mystique. She declares she hates him and promptly walks outside with his “copy / of Catullus” (15–16) and stays “out / there for an hour” (17), thus having “read” Catullus “up and down.”

On returning indoors, she proves to Bukowski that she is also “red up and down,” a natural red-head:

when she walked in I grabbed
her and pulled her to my lap.
I lifted my glass and told
her, “drink this.”

“Oh,” she said, “you’ve mixed
wine with Jim Beam, you’re gonna
get nasty.”

“You henna your hair, don’t
You?”

“You don’t look,” she said and
stood up and pulled down her
slacks and panties and
the hair down there was the
same as the hair
up there.

(24–38)

The sight of the seminaked woman leads Bukowski to Catullus in a perfectly evoked moment of confessional, stream-of-consciousness—Catullus too, no doubt, would have marveled at this beauty. Bukowski then thinks of Catullus’s Juventius poems (Carmen 24, Carmen 48, Carmen 81, and Carmen 99),
poems he never imitated because of his intense unease with bisexuality and homosexuality:\textsuperscript{28}

Catullus himself couldn’t have wished
for more historic or
wondrous grace;
then he went
goofy

for tender boys
not mad enough
to become
women.
(39–47)

In Bukowski’s snipe at Catullus’s liking for boys there is again a strong echo of the poet himself as he too rails against the sexuality of others when it suits. In \textit{Carmen 25} on Thallus and his theft of several of Catullus’s belongings, he employs direct sexual invective as ridicule; beginning the poem with the vocative use of \textit{cinaedus} (the passive recipient in sex), referring to the thief as soft (\textit{mollis})\textsuperscript{29} and threatening to whip him (11), which will further demean him in the cultural/sexual hierarchy of Roman masculinity. Similarly, in \textit{Carmen 33} Vibennius and his son are attacked for thieving, with the son singled out for sexual humiliation in the same way as Thallus; he too is a \textit{cinaedus} (2) and is additionally described as having an anus (\textit{culus}) that is voracious (\textit{vorax}) (4).\textsuperscript{30} Likewise, his assaults on the women he casts as promiscuous are characterized by an aggressive, judgmental tone.

Such instances of Catullan machismo—accusing men of being soft and passive, threatening to render opponents passive\textsuperscript{31} and humiliating women—are echoed in much of Bukowski’s verse and prose. Clements suggests that Bukowski’s hypervirility, expressed via extreme imagery is, however, a means of self-defense:

\textsuperscript{28}. One of the additional reasons for his dislike of Ginsberg and Burroughs.
\textsuperscript{29}. Catullus uses the comparative for emphasis, continuing the imagery in l. 10 with reference to his soft, gentle flanks and smooth hands (\textit{ne laneum latusculum manusque mollicellas}).
\textsuperscript{30}. The adjective used in the comparative as in \textit{Carmen 25}.
\textsuperscript{31}. See \textit{Carmen 15}, \textit{Carmen 16}, \textit{Carmen 21}, \textit{Carmen 37}. 
His excessive and continual focus on ugliness using grotesque humour is a foil and strategic mechanism to penetrate and expose hegemonic culture as well as prevent appropriation by it. (Clements 2013, 6)

Clements points to the use of obscenity, ugliness, and literary violence in Bukowski’s work as a means of counterargument, yet this could be extended to consider the use of such themes, vocabulary, and imagery to reveal disempowerment. This is a possible reading of the grotesque and savage in Bukowski in view of the demoralized representation of himself in much of the writing that includes assaults on other personae.

In relation to Bukowski, the voice of disempowerment may be categorized as a form of “protest masculinity” in which the marginalized male embodies a claim to hegemonic power but lacks the resources and “institutional authority” that sustains it (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 847–48). In this situation, his machismo ironically demonstrates a lack of power. In “to the whore who took my poems,” for example, Bukowski resorts to one of his standard words—“whore”—to rail against a thief. The word is part of his trade-mark “tough guy” persona, which was always performed in public, especially in interviews and poetry readings. And while the word signifies the power of Bukowski as the subject who vocalizes it, we also see his utter powerlessness, humiliation, and even victimization. All he has left is the word. Similarly, in “red up and down,” Bukowski indirectly boasts of the woman in his house, casts himself as a hard-drinking womanizer, and demonstrates a dominant sexual energy; yet at the same time, he has doubts, thinking about those who would wonder “where such an ugly / old man could get / such beauty” (19–21). The uncertainty is replaced by a return to a protestation of his masculinity as he thinks of Catullus, who would appreciate the woman, but who was far less manly than himself, falling as he did, “for tender boys / not mad enough / to become / women” (43–46). Bukowski may be an ugly old man, but he isn’t a faggot.

Likewise, while Catullus’s *vituperatio* can be interpreted along the lines of a traditional Priapic model of iambic invective in which the poet adopts a menacing, threatening attitude to prove his virility and reassert his manhood (Richlin 1981, 42), there is also an anti-Priapic mindset at play that reveals his powerlessness. In invectives such as *Carmen* 11, *Carmen* 37, and *Carmen* 58, all of which are directed against Lesbia and employ obscene imagery to humiliate her, there are also powerful admissions of love, betrayal, and hurt, and, perhaps more revealing, impotence. In *Carmen* 11, for example, Furius and Aurelius are asked to deliver “non bella dicta” (17) to Lesbia:
live with your three hundred lovers,
open your legs to them all (simultaneously)
lovelessly dragging the guts out of each of them
each time you do it.
(Catullus 1958, 17–20)

Whigham’s translation captures the misogyny of the Latin, accentuated as it is by the reference to the excessive number of moechi penetrating Lesbia simultaneously and her rupturing (rumpens) their groins (ilia). Catullus’s sense of social marginalization outside of the Roman system of gendered behavior, in which the freeborn male must always dominate and succeed in his sexual conquests, has been cauterized, hence his imagery of castration:

blind to the love that I had for you
once, and that you, tart, wantonly crushed
as the passing plough-blade slashes the flower
at the field’s edge.
(21–24)

On such vile outbursts in the Lesbia poems, Skinner (1991, 3) argues specifically for an impotent Priapic disposition on the poet’s part:

[The poems] in which Catullus helplessly deplores Lesbia’s promiscuity, invert the Priapic model of obscenity by foregrounding the speaker’s inability to do anything more than hurl feeble curses at those who have injured or betrayed him.

Catullus’s sense of being an outsider, primarily due to his Transpadane origins, is most strongly argued by Wiseman (1985, 111) who sees in Catullus’s native Verona a community that was a “hard-working, straight-laced, traditional society that knew and valued Greek culture, was not inhibited about commercial profit, but took seriously the responsibilities of honest dealing.” Wiseman argues that such an environment did not prepare Catullus for the fashionable elite society of Rome in terms of its values and lifestyle. While Wiseman may have a somewhat romanticized view of Catullus as an outsider,

32. *cum suis uiuat ualeatque moechis, / quos simul complexa tenet trecentos, / nullum amans uere, sed / identidem omnium / ilia rumpens* (*Carmen* 11. 18–22).
34. See Johnson 1999. There is a series of scholarly approaches to Catullus’s aggression; for a discussion of the literature, see Wray 2001.
there are traces of a socially disenfranchised voice in poems other than the Lesbia cycle. Indeed, in his poems that deride members of the Roman elite, there is the same voice of disempowered protestation that characterizes his diatribes against Lesbia. In *Carmen* 28, for example, Catullus expresses his sympathy for Veranius and Fabullus for their time serving with Piso, comparing the latter’s exploitation of them with his own experience in Bithynia with Memmius. The Priapic imagery is dominant and intensely graphic, yet as W. Jeffrey Tatum notes: “This poem is not primarily about sleaze: it is about ingratitude and exploitation, the exploitation felt by the municipal companion who has fulfilled his part of the bargain” (Tatum 1997, 495).35 Skinner offers a more nuanced reading of Catullus’s outsider status, particularly in comparison to Wiseman, suggesting:

> Throughout his poetry, Catullus appears to regard himself sometimes as Italian, at other times as Roman. Implicitly in poems 1 and 31, and quite explicitly at 39.13, he proclaims himself a *Transpadanus*, and therefore an outsider; but in 68a he insists that his *domus* is at Rome. (Skinner 2003, 34)

Skinner (ibid., 119) regards Catullus’s Italian voice as “his familiar stage persona of Veronese outsider,” which is particularly in evidence in poems dealing with men such as Piso, Memmius, Mamurra, and Caesar.

This is not to argue, however, that Catullus occupied anywhere near as socially and economically disadvantaged a background as Bukowski. Rather, it is to highlight the presence of “protest masculinity” in their works and to suggest that its origins lie in a self-identification with an outsider status on the part of both. In this sense, Catullus’s violent responses to victimhood may have exerted a strong influence on Bukowski.

In a metaphorical sense, Bukowski, the Latin-less reader of Catullus, adopted a persona that suggests an uncanny understanding of the terms *contubernalis* and *comes* as ones redolent with affection; journeys taken; battles fought, lost, and won; disdain; disrespect; hate; and love. He recognized in Catullus not only a fellow traveler, racetrack companion, and poet but an outsider. Catullus’s forceful protestations against the men and women who thwarted or belittled him, whether real, exaggerated, or imagined, struck a chord with Bukowski and gave him the voice with which to express his own life experiences, sometimes joyously ironic—even self-deprecatory—but most often, beaten down.

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35. Tatum defines Catullus’s Transpadane origins in terms of an ambiguous status, “Catullus, the Transpadane poet in Rome, remains always insider and outsider at once” (494).
Bibliography


