Questioning Authority and Authenticity: The Creative Translations of Josephine Balmer

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Introduction

What authority does a translation have? This is the vexed and vexatious question that has troubled translators, critics and readers in general for centuries. For, whilst a translation may be intended as a valid representation of an original work that was composed in another language, in another place and time that assumption of validity raises the spectre of doubt as to the "accuracy", "faithfulness" and indeed "authenticity" of the translation. Images of negativity abound with regard to translation: there is an Italian adage, *traduttore/traditore,* which associates translation directly with betrayal, while the old sexist notion of the *belles infidèles* suggests that if a translation is beautiful, then, like a woman, it is bound to be unfaithful. These are just two of many figurative images highlighting the unfaithfulness of translations, which exist alongside images of the inferiority of translations, seen as derivative, second-class, mere copies of a superior original that came into existence somewhere else. John Dryden famously compared the translator to an indentured labourer, forced to do his owner's bidding and never receiving thanks or praise for his work:

> But slaves we are, and labour on another man's plantation; we dress the vineyard but the wine is the owner's; if the soil be sometime barren, then we are sure of

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J. Boase-Beier et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Literary Translation*, Palgrave Studies in Translating and Interpreting, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75753-7_17

> being scourged: if it be fruitful, and our care succeeds, we are not thanked, for the proud reader will only say, the poor drudge has done his duty. (Dryden 2006: 150)

Yet, despite the discourse of negativity around translation, the history of culture is also a history of translations. The vast collection of Christian theological disputation which continues to the present day still wrestles with the fact that the Bibles we have are translations of translations. The King James Bible was declared the "Authorized Version" in 1611, in hopes of granting it greater authority than previous English translations had enjoyed, yet countless subsequent versions have since appeared, all of which claim authority as "the Bible." In 2011, when a new translation of the Roman Catholic Mass was introduced into English churches, it was described on the internet as "a much more faithful rendering of the third edition of the *Missale Romanum*". Such a statement gives us pause for thought: the phrase "much more faithful" implies a value judgement and suggests that previous versions of the Mass were somehow less faithful. But, we may ask, how were they less faithful, since we are also told that the new version is a "much more faithful" rendering of the third edition of the "definitive Latin text" introduced by Saint Pope John Paul in 2001. So we may therefore also ask what it means to be "much more faithful" to a third edition of something that has, in any case, undergone centuries of textual manipulation of multiple kinds.

Both the Judeo-Christian tradition in Western culture, and the Hellenic tradition, have been handed down across millennia through translations; indeed, their very survival is dependent on their being continually translated. When we read the *Odyssey* or watch a performance of *Oedipus Rex*, we do so on the assumption that we are reading a poem by Homer and seeing a play by Sophocles, which means that we take the translation on trust, believing it to be a rendering of the text we refer to as the "original." Yet, in the case of an ancient text, that "original" is elusive. Through centuries, the original may have been transcribed from an oral work, copied by scribes with varying degrees of competence, lost and found in manuscript form, edited, reprinted, reproduced in a variety of ways including translation, all of which combine to make the idea of a single, authoritative original difficult, if not impossible, to pin down. This is increasingly recognized today by both translators and classical scholars, so that translation can be seen as a literary act that ensures the continued existence of a tenuous original. The poet and classical translator, Tony Harrison, has suggested that "the original is fluid, the translation a static moment in that fluidity" (Harrison 1991: 146). Translations, Harrison argues, are not built to survive; rather their task is to ensure the survival of the origi-

nal, which comes to us "through translation's many flowerings and decays" (Harrison 1991: 146). The illusion is that an original is fixed, whereas in fact it is the translation that is fixed, since it comes into being to fulfil its role of reinvigorating an original for a particular readership at a particular moment in time, and is destined to be replaced by subsequent translations, which will reflect the aesthetic norms and needs of a different readership. Hence we accept the idea of a much more faithful rendering of a third edition of something because what we are hoping to be given is a version of what we believe to be an immutable original.

Jorge Luis Borges, in his famous 1932 essay 'The Homeric Versions', also engages with the myth of the unchanging original. Translations, according to Borges, are "a partial and precious documentation of the changes a text suffers", and he goes on:

> Are not the many versions of the Iliad—from Chapman to Magnien—merely different perspectives on a mutable fact, a long experimental game of chance played with omissions and emphases? … To assume that every recombination of elements is necessarily inferior to its original form is to assume that draft 9 is necessarily inferior to draft H_ for there can only be drafts. The concept of the "definitive text" corresponds only to religion or exhaustion. (Borges 2002: 15)

Borges dismisses debates about faithfulness and unfaithfulness, and dismisses also what he terms the "superstition" about the inferiority of translations. He refuses to evaluate faithfulness, provocatively telling us that either all translations are faithful, or none of them are, since translations are merely manifestations of different perspectives. For Borges, translation was not about a linguistic process of transfer, it was about a creative process, in which a text is reshaped, rewritten, recomposed for a new readership. That creative process must inevitably involve transforming the original into something different.

All translators face the same problem of recreating a work written in one linguistic and cultural context for a completely different readership, but the translator who embarks on the task of translating a work that was produced in the distant past faces a number of specific problems that relate to its previous existence. In the case of a text such as the *Odyssey*, there is a long history of previous translations of something which started out as an oral poem, along with a history of commentaries and editions, and then there is the question of the status of the text which has become canonical. Nevertheless, the translator has to find a way of bringing that canonical work back to life so as to make it accessible to new readers. As Seamus Heaney puts it in the preface to his translation of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem 'Beowulf', although the narrative ele-

ments may belong to another age, a work of art "lives in its own continuous present", where it is "equal to our knowledge of reality in the present time" (Heaney 1999: ix). Translating an ancient text means therefore being alive to the history of that text in its multiple manifestations through time, whilst seeking to bring out that which is eternally present.

Creatively Blurring the Lines

One of the most successful contemporary translators of ancient Greek and Latin authors is the English poet, Josephine Balmer. What makes Balmer's work so interesting as a case study is that her approach to translating is simultaneously scholarly and creative, and alongside her several collections of poetry and translations she has published a series of self-reflective essays, and also a monograph in which she raises key questions about authority and authenticity with regard to her relationship with the ancient texts that she is seeking to recreate. For a case study involving a single translator this wealth of information about her own creative processes is invaluable. In an essay from 2006, entitled 'What comes next? Reconstructing the classics', Balmer starts with the familiar question of why it is necessary to keep on translating works that have been translated many times before. One answer to the question is the need in every generation for contemporary translations, but Balmer also highlights the importance of the translator's own need to engage creatively with ancient texts:

> For perhaps more than any other branch of the field, classical translation has always enjoyed a close, symbiotic relationship with creative writing. Unlike the translator of a contemporary work, often (falsely) perceived to be a mere mediator between original author and target reader, the translator of a classic text can be seen more as an innovator, making their own mark on an already well-known work, reimagining it for a new generation, a new audience. (Balmer 2006: 184)

Over the last few decades there has been a revival of interest in Ancient Greek and Latin works, which has led not only to a growing number of translations, many by leading writers and playwrights, but also to the use of classical texts in works by writers such as Derek Walcott, Margaret Atwood, Heiner Muller, Seamus Heaney and David Malouf. Yet, at the same time, this has coincided with the decline of Greek and Latin as school subjects; hence the revival of interest in the ancient world is dependent on translations. The classical scholar Lorna Hardwick suggests that in the latter part of the twentieth century there

were three main trends in published translations of classical works as the number of readers able to access the ancient texts declined. The first of these she sees as canonical translations of canonical texts, of which probably the most significant are E.V. Rieu's translations of the *Odyssey* in 1946 and the *Iliad* in 1950, in the newly-created Penguin Classics series, both of which became best-sellers. This was followed by an increased interest in lesser-known ancient writers, including women, and most recently by what Hardwick calls "the creative blurring of the distinction between different kinds of translations" (Hardwick 2000: 12).

This idea of creative blurring is a useful phrase to apply to Balmer's engagement with ancient texts. Balmer points out that although classical translators have to contend with the canonical status of the ancient texts and do not have the luxury of being able to communicate with a living original author, the very absence of clear contextual understanding leads to a different kind of freedom for a translator:

> If we do not know how or why an author wrote a work, if we do not know when they lived or who they were, if we cannot even agree on their gender, as is sometimes the case, then we can be far freer in our interpretation of the original text (Balmer 2006: 186)

Balmer also notes the growing importance of classical translation in contemporary poetry from the 1990s onwards, citing Walcott's *Omeros*, Michael Longley's Belfast versions of Homer, Ted Hughes' versions of Ovid and Aeschylus, and the poetry of Heaney, Simon Armitage and Ann Carson as examples. She questions whether this might be "a response to a *fin de siecle* unease about the future which also led to an obsession with the distant past" (Balmer 2013a: 38), but, regardless of hypotheses as to the cause of this trend, what can be seen is that a substantial number of writers, some of whom have no training in the classics, are finding inspiration from ancient texts that seem no longer to be intimidating because of their canonical status.

Piecing Together Fragments

Balmer's collection *Classical Women Poets* was published by Bloodaxe in 1996 and includes an important preface which both explains the strategies she used and raises significant questions about how contemporary readers view ancient writers. Balmer had previously published a collection of poems by Sappho, but *Classical Women Poets* is a more experimental volume, not least because

much of the poetry only exists as fragments. In her preface, Balmer discusses the difficulty of making sense of fragments, and questions even the validity of her decision to create an anthology of poetry by women. Given the low status of women in the ancient world, she poses some basic questions as to:

> how they came to be poets at all; how they learnt their craft, in what circumstances they wrote or performed, how they perceived their work and how it was received by the male literary establishment. (Balmer 1996: 9)

She points out that not only have the textual intentions of ancient writers been lost, but so have most of the texts themselves. Moreover, the conditions for the creation, circulation and reception of classical poetry which involved oral composition and performance, an emphasis on tradition rather than originality, and a musical versification based on syllable length and not on stress patterns, have become completely alien to contemporary readers. How, she asks, is a translator going to persuade readers that a hotchpotch of seemingly unconnected fragmented pieces of poetry are going to be worth their attention. One of her solutions is to bring the reader into her decision-making process by including a series of paratextual markers. She includes a key to her translations at the end of her preface:

> ( ) denotes a conjectural meaning
> …denotes a break in the papyrus
> * denotes the end of the fragment
>
> (Balmer 1996: 22)

Recognizing the subjectivity of her approach, she invites readers to see how this technique works in her version of four tiny fragments by Corinna which she has stitched together to make a single poem, significantly entitled 'Fragments':

> And I spoke…
> *
> of myself….
> *
> (and for all) of us….
> *
> of our houses
> *
> (Of) chine-meat…
> *
> ……and chairs….. (Balmer 1996: 44)

Balmer also points out that she drew upon additional information provided by commentaries by classical scholars. A constant refrain in Balmer's thinking about her own work is the importance she places upon drawing on more traditional classical scholarship as a way of bridging gaps between scholars and translators. Translation, for Balmer, is creative writing but it is also scholarship. In a chapter on her translations of classical women's poetry in her book, *Piecing Together the Fragments* (Balmer 2013a), Balmer refers to her debt to classical scholarship, and her anthology includes not only a preface but also footnotes and a series of appendices which demonstrate her aim both to create living poems and to add to the body of research on the women she has selected to translate. The appendices include a list of names of known classical women poets, regardless of whether any of their work has survived; a list of ancient writers and sources mentioned in the text; a glossary of proper names for readers unfamiliar with Ancient Greek and Latin cultures; a list of texts and abbreviations which she has used as sources for her translations and a key to the poems for classical scholars. For each of the women poets selected there is a short introduction which gives brief biographical details, if there are any, and a summary of the academic debates around their lives and their works. She also discusses the language of the extant fragments, and voices her own opinion regarding some of the contentious views about poets selected. So, for example, she defends the Ancient Greek poet Anyte against accusations by some classicists of being either a "patriarchal lackey or purveyor of domestic whimsy", arguing that her art "lies in her ability to straddle the two" (Balmer 1996: 67). Balmer draws our attention to a poem she has entitled 'A Lost Puppy':

> You met your fate like those great dogs of old
> by the curling roots
> of a coward's bush;Loci, of Locri,
> swiftest of pups- especially to bark,
> into your light paws he sank harsh poison
> that speckle-necked snake.
> (Balmer 1996: 75)

In her footnotes Balmer shows how Anyte's little poem refracts lines from other writers: "you met your fate" echoes Andromache's lament for Hector in Homer's *Iliad*, while the phrase "speckle-necked snake" is a translation of a compound adjective, *poikilodeiros*, found in Hesiod. "Swiftest to bark" is Balmer's rendering of an onomatopoeic Greek epithet, *philophthoggos*, meaning literally "noise-loving" coined by Anyte. In this way, through her explanatory footnotes, which both expose her own choices as a translator and refer readers to the evidence from classical commentary, Balmer highlights the innovative technique of a little-known ancient female poet.

Balmer also made a deliberate choice to give titles to all the fragments. Justifying her decision, she argues that some titles had already been given by early commentators, but says she also followed the example of some previous translators. She cites Willis Barnstone who, in his 1962 versions of Sappho, "employed titles as an 'informational strategy' to help readers make sense of disjointed fragments, while Don Paterson, whose translations of Rainer Maria Rilke appeared in 2006, suggested that the use of titles can act as a 'small mnemonic handle'" (Balmer 2013a: 108).

These references to other translators show another important strand in Balmer's self-reflections on her translations. Concerned as she is with the complex web of problems surrounding a decision to create in the first instance an anthology of classical women writers for whom such a concept would have been unthinkable, Balmer draws upon the ideas of other feminist translators and translation scholars. She justifies her decision to use footnotes, for example by a reference to Barbara Godard's advice to the feminist translator to "flaunt the signs of her manipulation of the text" (Godard 1990: 94). She also refers in her preface to other contemporary feminist translators, including Miriam Diaz-Diocaretz, whose book *Translating Feminist Discourse* (Diaz-Diocaretz 1991) discusses the difficulties she encountered when translating the poetry of Adrienne Rich into Spanish, and Suzanne Jill Levine, whose *The Subversive Scribe* (1991) describes the problems she faced when translating puns and word play in Manuel Puig and Guillermo Cabrera Infante's novels. However, both these translators had the advantage of being able to discuss cultural and linguistic issues with the original writers, whereas this is an impossibility for the translator of ancient texts. Where then can the translator of classical women's poetry look for guidance, Balmer asks, and finds her answer in the work of contemporary women poets writing in English:

> whose linguistic nuances can resonate retrospectively in their literary foremothers; for by translating classical poetry into present-day English, it becomes at once ancient and modern, the product of both an unknown and familiar culture. (Balmer 1996: 18)

Transgressing Boundaries

In the Epilogue to her book, Levine makes an important point about the relationship between a translator and the text she is translating. If we recognize the borderlessness between translations and original, she suggests, then perhaps we can begin to acknowledge the creativity of the translator:

> Translation, straddling the scholarly and the creative, can be a route through which a writer/translator may seek to reconcile fragments: fragments of texts, of language, of oneself. From a readerly perspective, translation is an act of interpretation. From a writerly one (for this now visible invisible scribe), it has been a (w)rite of passage. (Levine 1991: 184)

Balmer is very clear about the close relationship between creative writing and classical translation. In the absence of clearly definable originals, a translator has to be resourceful, for the primary task is to recreate poetry, to breathe new life into long dead authors. And it is not only the ambiguity of the status of the extant manuscripts, nor the diversity of scholarly opinion about them, that poses problems for the translator. There is another, perhaps even greater, problem: we have no idea what the ancient texts sounded like. The languages in which they were created have long since ceased to exist. As Balmer puts it:

> The problem is not just the meagre biographical information available about a poet's life, often only surviving from sources written centuries after their deaths, but that the cultural context in which they flourished has also vanished. Not only are classical authors silent but their texts come from a silenced, long-dead world, a world that must be reconstructed in tatters from the rubble. And each generation's reconstruction can be torn down and rebuilt to a completely different model by the next…. (Balmer 2009a: 45)

One poet who exemplifies this process of endless reconstruction over generations is the Roman poet Catullus. Balmer notes that, when she agreed to translate Catullus for twenty-first century readers, she knew that the greatest challenge would be to find a way of making a well-known and much loved ancient poet "freshly minted again", above all "to make it my own" (Balmer 2009a: 50). Paradoxically, she suggests, in an essay entitled 'Handbags and Gladrags: a woman in transgression, reflecting' (Balmer 2012), the clearest opportunity for her to be transgressive came from translating male poets. She points out that Catullus has been one of the least enticing poets for women translators, probably due to his scabrous language and invective against women and refers to a list of 100 poets who have translated Catullus, published in 2001, of whom only five were women (Gaisser 2001). Nevertheless, Balmer's translations of *Catullus, Poems of Love and Hate* were published in 2004 by Bloodaxe (Balmer 2004a), and in the same year that publisher also brought out a second book, *Chasing Catullus: Poems, Translations and Transgressions* (Balmer 2004b) In her 'Handbags and Gladrags' essay she outlines the way in which the task of translating Catullus led her on to a second, rather different collection.

Starting work on Catullus and looking for the right note, Balmer shows how, in her translation of one poem, she found herself recalling the wit of Mae West and how in echoing a riposte of the Hollywood actress, probably subconsciously at first, she had "taken Catullus' poem out of the arena of male sexual insult into one of female confidence and insouciance, from the gutter to glamour" (Balmer 2012: 7). In her preface to *Catullus, Poems of Love and Hate*, she explains her translation strategies, but opens with a section entitled 'Catullus the Survivor' which provides information on how Catullus' poetry came to survive the centuries. Until the fourteenth century only one poem survived in a ninth-century manuscript, but then another manuscript with 116 poems unexpectedly turned up in Verona:

> This manuscript, apparently written in France in the late 12th century, disappeared again a few years later, this time for good. But all was not lost; it had already been copied-possibly for the Italian poet Petrarch- and then recopied again. The text we now have is based on three surviving second-or third-hand copies, each one packed with textual errors and savagely emended by scholars over the centuries, but similar enough to lead them too believe that the words on the page are as close as we might hope to get to Catullus' own- a miracle of literary tenacity. (Balmer 2004a: 11)

She goes on to discuss the problem of Catullus' language, in particular his use of scabrous terms, which raises questions as to what kind of obscenity we might be dealing with. She questions the scale of the outrage his use of sexual idiom might have caused for his contemporaries, and reflects on the difficulty for any writer of gauging the degree of offence sexual idioms might cause, given that sexual idiom changes very quickly, as do attitudes to certain words, which can be offensive to one generation, yet acceptable to another. Since Catullus used slang and colloquialisms and appears to have deliberately sought to shock, this has to be taken into account when translating, though the translator also has to be mindful of the fact that too much emphasis on contemporary slang can make a translation dated and trying too hard to shock readers can also be counter-productive. Balmer opts for a translation that highlights what she describes as "not just a sense of mischief, but a sense of music", which she finds apparent in Catullus' poetry, adding that perhaps, as a woman, she could not take his belligerent posturing too seriously, "but then neither, one suspects, did Catullus!" (Balmer 2004a: 24).

The final section of the preface explains what some may find transgressive about her translation. She acknowledges that ever since the fourteenth century manuscript first appeared, there has been controversy over the arrange-

ment of the poems. Subsequent Latin editions followed the organization of that manuscript, with the poems arranged in three sections. Later editors restructured the sequence, and Balmer justifies her decision to order the poems by theme, driven by a desire to make the poetry as accessible as possible and as funny and enjoyable to those readers who have no Latin and no prior knowledge of Catullus. She also added titles and footnotes, though this time the footnotes are placed at the back of the volume in an appendix, "for those curious to know more" (Balmer 2004a: 26). Her aim, with these translations is stated simply: "the poetry, with all its beauty, obscenity, and above all, its wit, must ultimately speak for itself in English as it does in Latin" (Balmer 2004a: 26). Her version, she acknowledges, will add to the centuries-old dialogue between translators, commentators, scholars and Catullus, "for there are and always will be as many Catulluses as there are readers to laugh with him- and scholars to dissect the jokes" (Balmer 2004a: 27).

Balmer's *Chasing Catullus* (2004b) marks a change of direction in her work, to more overt transgression. She explains how, during the work on her Catullus translations, she was forced to confront the terminal illness of her beloved six-year-old niece. In a beautiful essay entitled 'Jumping their Bones: Translating, Transgressing and Creating', she says that she felt compelled to write about the experience, almost as a form of exorcism:

> Nevertheless, many of the poems I wrote were somehow connected with my work as a translator; versions-in some cases perversions-of classical texts or mythology, as if I could not write about such deeply-felt, such disturbing emotions, except through the prism of classical literature. (Balmer 2009a: 52)

Many of the poems in the book form a diary sequence following the illness and death of her niece. As an example of what she was doing, she shows how she translated a short extract from a fifth-century AD Latin epic by Claudian describing the moment that Proserpina is abducted by Hades. At the start of the poem, the young girl is picking flowers, then comes the sound of horses, "four sets of cloven hooves" which remind us of the horsemen of the Apocalypse, with one "harbinger, /camp-follower, or even Death Himself", whose presence drains the world of light and colour. After he has gone, the light seeps back:

> everywhere was light
> sun and sky and light-
> and your small daughter nowhere to be seen. (Balmer 2004b: 28)

Balmer gave the translation a title: '(2/8: 6.47 AM)', the date and time of her niece's death, and through this she transforms a translation of an ancient text into something quite different, re-contextualizing the Latin and simultaneously offering the reader a multidimensional world. Later in the essay, Balmer stresses the importance for her of juxtaposing contexts, so that translation and original come into dialogue together, informing one another and adding for the reader further layers of meaning. Classical translation, she states simply, "provided a means for me to say things that might otherwise have been unsayable" (Balmer 2009a: 55).

This essay appeared in a book edited by Stephen Harrison, entitled *Living Classics*, subtitled *Greece and Rome in Contemporary Poetry in English* (Harrison 2009). In that same volume there is an essay by the Irish poet, Michael Longley, where he describes himself as having been "Homer-haunted for fifty years", and shows how "Homer enabled me to write belated lamentations for my father and mother" (Longley 2009: 101). In an earlier essay, entitled tellingly 'What comes next: reconstructing the classics', Balmer acknowledges a debt to Longley, and refers to Longley's famous sonnet, 'Ceasefire', his version of a passage from Book 24 of the *Iliad* where old King Priam of Troy finds reconciliation with the Greek hero, Achilles, who has killed his son Hector in battle. This little poem Balmer says "was able to say more, perhaps, than any 'original' poem, for want of a better word, about peoples hopes and fears for the future, at that time in Northern Ireland" (Balmer 2006: 191).

Nevertheless, in this essay Balmer also expresses a sense of uneasiness about what might be seen as appropriating ancient voices for her own work. The question she poses is a serious one for translators. She cites examples of transgressive appropriation by other writers such as Euripides' new readings of Greek myth, Virgil's reworking of the *Odyssey* in his *Aeneid*, down to the contemporary Caribbean reworking of Homer in Walcott's *Omeros*, but she is also aware of the ideological implications of cultural appropriation. That essay came out in 2006, in a collection entitled *The Translator as Writer*, but by the time her monograph appeared in 2013, she had come to terms with her doubts and acknowledges that what she has been doing with classical texts is a form of homage and a reassuring force:

> By taking contemporary grief and placing it in the perspective of the distant, classical past, it finds a means of accepting the unacceptable. At the same time, it utilises the lessons learned through the translation of unstable and fragmentary classical texts- recontextualization, juxtaposition, the importance of framing and of scholarly apparatus- to provide a means by which the poet can come to terms with seemingly random acts of fate; the grief echoing down through

> the centuries brings comfort for present loss, a sense of consolation and reassurance, hopefully both to reader as well as writer … Here intertextuality also acts as a reassuring force, a means of anchoring that chaos, both thematically and also through semantics and poetic form. (Balmer 2013a: 199)

Feeding the Imagination

Since the 1990s, Balmer's work as a poet and classical translator shows a growing confidence in her ability to engage with the ancient world and to bring the poems of long-dead writers to a contemporary readership. Her continued self-reflections, through prefaces and essays, shed light on the shifts of emphasis in her writing, as she becomes ever more transgressive in terms of how she sees translating. Throughout her self-reflections is an insistence on the need to create good poetry and an assertion that, given the unstable nature of the so-called originals, the translator has not only a right but also an obligation to be creative. She acknowledges that this is a risky enterprise: "It is often necessary to don a flak jacket to step out in to the firing range of our no-man's land between translation and original, scholarship and creativity" she wrote in 2012. Significantly, a comment by George Szirtes on the front cover of Balmer's next collection after her Catullus poems, *The Word for Sorrow* (2009b) emphasizes her bravery and praises her poetry as not only beautiful and witty but also brave.

Balmer acknowledges that this book took her in new directions. What she wanted to do was to explore the interaction between translator and translator-as-narrator and she also wanted to expand the personal, so as "to approach wider, national traumas, and the conflicts and divisions inherent within them" (Balmer 2013a: 201). She began work on a text that had been widely read in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but had almost disappeared from view in the post-Enlightenment period, Ovid's *Tristia*. The *Tristia* poems along with the *Epistulae ex Ponto* were supposedly written in during Ovid's mysterious and unexplained exile to the city of Tomis on the Black Sea, around 8 AD, though it has also been suggested that the exile might have been fictitious. A recent collection of essays edited by classical scholar Jennifer Ingleheart, *Two Thousand Years of Solitude* explores the literary treatment of exile inspired by Ovid. In her introduction, Ingleheart points out that a major feature of Ovid's exile poetry is his self-mythologizing, arguing that Ovid transcends his own unhappy personal circumstances through his writing:

> as he appropriates the roles of a dizzying array of archetypal suffering figures: for example, the human unjustly punished for a single lapse; the unremitting target of the vindictive revenge of a piqued, all-powerful deity; the artist and/or parent destroyed by their own creation; the lover bemoaning their separation from their beloved; the agonized, isolated individual unable to articulate and share the burden of his suffering; the wanderer doomed to eternal separation from his homeland. (Ingleheart 2011:19)

Balmer refers to the use of Ovid's exile poetry by other writers, including Walcott, Malouf, Osip Mandelstam, Joseph Brodsky, Derek Mahon, and Christoph Ransmayr, and notes that at the end of the twentieth century new translations began to appear. This is not particularly surprising, given the significance of exile as a literary theme in the late twentieth-century, but what Balmer wrestled with was to find a way of making her version come to life given, given also that she could not possibly include all of Ovid's poems in her collection. She narrowed down and condensed the poems, as she explains:

> my version of *Tristia* 1.2 was condensed down quite radically from 110 lines to around twenty, offering a radical distillation of the original rather than a line for line translation. I also mixed the line order of the original poem, so that it starts with line 45 of the original in order to provide a natural continuation from the end of the preceding poem. (Balmer 2013a: 211)

For what Balmer wanted was to create a fluent narrative, to find what Heaney describes as "the tuning fork that will give you the note and pitch for the overall music of the work" (Heaney 1999: xxvi). She explains that she wanted the finished manuscript to look like pages from a translator's notebook, snapshots of a work in progress, and started out with Ovid "anticipating-wanting- a moving, raw expression of grief and loss, an exposition of the plight of the exiled artist" (Balmer 2009a: xvi). Yet the more she translated, the more she came to discover a strand of humour in Ovid, created via continual shifts of register. That humour she found similar to the language and shifts of tone in letters home from British officers in Gallipoli during the First World War.

The Gallipoli link is the tuning fork for this book. Balmer recounts how one day, while working at her desk, an electrical storm forced her to log off the internet, so she turned instead to her old second-hand dictionary and for the first time became aware of a name and a date, 1900, on the flyleaf. Subsequent searches discovered that the original owner of the dictionary had been posted to Gallipoli in 1915, "to the Dardanelles, which Ovid had described crossing

in the poem I was translating" (Balmer 2009a: xiii). Gallipoli saw the deaths of over 100,000 Allied and Turkish troops. Balmer searched further, and found private diaries and letters of British soldiers. She also made contact with the daughter of the original dictionary owner:

> Soon more parallels were revealed: old newspaper photos of the regiment lined up on the now demolished Malvern Road railway station in Cheltenham just before leaving for the East, suggested parallels with Ovid's famous poem describing his last night before exile (*Tristia* 1.3, here 'Naso's Last Night') *The Word for Sorrow* took shape, a series of poems exploring the story of an old second-hand dictionary and its owner alongside versions of the texts it was helping to translate. (Balmer 2009a: xii-xiv)

Once again, Balmer provides additional information in an appendix, only with this book she supplies a section entitled 'References and Notes' which gives details not only of the *Tristia* sources, but also the letters and diaries she found, along with conversations with families of soldiers from the Gallipoli campaign (Balmer 2009a: XX). *The Word for Sorrow* is intensely personal, but though the poems deal with intimate feelings, the dual context is that of the tragedy of war and exile. There are two I-speakers throughout, Ovid, here referred to by his family name, Naso, and Geoffrey, the owner of the dictionary. Poems in which the two men speak are juxtaposed. 'Among the Graves: Salonica', in which there is a reference to Edward Balmer, the poet's great-uncle who was buried just north of Thessalonki in 1918, for example, is set alongside 'Naso the Barbarian', a poem that condenses and rewrites *Tristia* 5.7. But whereas Ovid laments the barbarity of the men of Tomis and of their language, Balmer's poem opens with the words "I see a world without culture.." and ends with a very twenty-first century question "who is the barbarian here?" (Balmer 2009a: 41).

In 2013 Balmer published an essay with a significant title: 'Whose Classics? Transgressing and recreating ancient Greek and Latin texts.' The title is noteworthy in that the word "translation" does not occur. Instead, the terminology refers to transgression and recreation. Reflecting on *Chasing Catullus* and *The Word for Sorrow*, she has this to say:

> there is always the risk of being accused of ransacking ancient literature like a grave robber- taking 'their' Classics, editing them, paring them down, gutting them, transgressing them. perverting them, turning them upside down, making them accessible or contemporary, making them even stranger. (Balmer 2013b: 50)

But, she maintains, there is nothing new in this, and such appropriations have been going on for centuries, for it is through such new readings and rewritings that works continue. Balmer cites the Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski's Travels with Herodotus who said simply "The past does not exist. There are only infinite recordings of it" (Kapuscinski 2007: 262). Her essay concludes with the last four lines of the title poem in *The Word for Sorrow*:

> We are all translating the same story
> search same words in same thesaurus
> What drives us on, keeps us to our path
> in every version is not gain but loss. (Balmer 2009a: 47)

"Loss" is a word with several layers of meaning in Balmer's poetry. It refers, obviously, to the perennial problem of what is always lost in translation, and it also refers to the ancient world of which so much has been lost, not least what the ancient poets sounded like. It also refers to loss as inspiration. The trigger for *Chasing Catullus* was the tragic death of a small child, and the inspiration behind Balmer's next collection of poems was the death of her mother. The title, *Letting Go: Thirty Mourning Sonnets (and two poems)* holds an echo of Pablo Neruda's famous *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. This collection too, is inspired by translating other writers, and in the list of sources provided we find Virgil, Plato, Homer, and Sappho among the writers named. Poem xiv, 'Let Go' recounts a dream in which the poet's mother comes to her "smarter than ever" and tells her grieving daughter to let go of her anger, "or this exile of grief will be too long". The last two lines are a direct translation of the moment in Book 2 of the *Aeneid* when Aeneas vista the underworld and tries in vain to embrace his lost wife, Creusa:

> I tried and tried and tried to embrace her
> but, like a thought on waking, she was gone. (Balmer 2017: 20)

The Latin stresses the three times that Aeneas reaches out his arms and fails to hold the ghostly figure of his dead wife; Balmer repeats the same word "tried" three times which gives the impression of a child speaking. And it is with the image of a happy child that the collection end: the evening star, 'Sappho's Hesperus'

> it guides the fishing boats, herds in sailors,
> brings each child running home to her mother. (Balmer 2017: 22)

Balmer has used the word "odyssey" to describe her progress from translating tiny Greek fragments to the creation of new poetry inspired by translating ancient writers (Balmer 2006: 194). Her most recent collection is entitled *The Paths of Survival*, and once again is a collection comprising her own poetry and translations of fragments. This time the fragments are of Aeschylus' lost tragedy, Mymidons. But she maintains that the challenge is always the same, and that challenge is to bring the past into the present and to give it new life and new meaning. Classical literature is a vast creative resource for writers, and Balmer's work stretches our understanding of translation, blurring the lines until translation and original become indistinguishable from one another.

This essay began with a question about translation and authority, about what the idea of a "faithful" translation might mean. With regard to the ancient works that have come to be seen as foundational texts for Western culture, there is the added difficulty of the authority which those canonical works have come to hold. But things are changing: as Stephen Harrison argues, "after two millennia the classic texts of Greece and Rome cannot in any case be read unmediated" (Harrison 2009: 15). Literary refashioning is inevitable, and as T.S. Eliot acknowledged in 1919, just as we remake the past for our own time, in so doing our present is shaped by the past (Eliot 2014). The so-called original texts from the ancient world have been endlessly mediated through the work of many hands, they have been reconfigured through generations of different aesthetic and ideological criteria. What Balmer has done, through her poetic translations and her valuable self-reflections is to highlight the creative role of the individual translator who reaches out to new readers. Her use of the term "transgression" acquires a feminist resonance; she is not using the term in its negative sense, but rather in the way that feminist thinking has highlighted the importance of reclaiming something that has been hidden or lost. Balmer's transgressions, which bring ancient poetry back to life are acts not of defiance, but of respect and even, dare one say it, of love.

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