



## *Inhabiting the Classic, Constructing the Self: Translated and Translating Voices in Josephine Balmer's Poetry*

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My discussion of Josephine Balmer's poetry needs to be prefaced by the acknowledgement of a plain fact: the best and so far the most comprehensive criticism on Josephine Balmer is provided by the author herself, who is an excellent translator, a sensitive poet, as well as a perceptive scholar in the field of Classical Reception Studies. Her recent volume *Piecing Together the Fragments* (2013) challenges traditional boundaries of academic writing, in that it deals with, among other texts, her own translations and poetry collections within a thoroughly researched exploration of the history of classical translation. The present essay focusses on the role of the self as a layered construct that actively shapes, while in turn being shaped by, processes of translation and other creative interactions with the classical text. More generally, my contribution aims at introducing Balmer's trans-creative work to a wider academic readership, as it might represent a productive ground for scholars of Translation Studies, English Literature, and (Classical) Reception Studies alike.

In contemporary poetry, Balmer's *Chasing Catullus* (2004) and *The Word for Sorrow* (2009) are not unique in overwriting the classical text in translation with more or less hidden autobiographical narratives and meditations recast from the poet's memories. This is a strategy that has often been employed in the context of a localized historical background, yet one aspiring to give voice to transhistorical or universalistic



concerns: several poems by Michael Longley, including his versions from Homer and Latin elegies, by Seamus Heaney, such as the sequence "Mycenae Lookout" (*The Spirit Level*, 1996), and Maureen Almond's *Oyster Baby* (2002) and *The Works* (2004) are only few examples of the creation of new poetry out of translated verse. Perhaps closer to Balmer's approach is the work of the Canadian poet Anne Carson (*Men in the Off Hours*, 2000; *Nox*, 2010): both writers take classical translation, the translator's point of view and, to different degrees, academic scholarship, as their *materia poetica*, that is as integral parts of both the creative process and the finished product.

Balmer's practice, however, looks back to Modernist poets such as T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound. More specifically, she links her "transgressional" poetics to the Imagists' approach to translation, which they practised as a creative act in its own right, in other words as an activity whose aim was not "to stand as the original source text [...] [but] as original poems" (Balmer 2013a: 31) to the extent of including translated poetry in their anthologies. In particular, Ezra Pound is one of Balmer's acknowledged models. With his (re)creative appropriation of Propertius as a mask or *persona*, Pound showed how the literary past could be inhabited and manipulated anew, how indeed his individual talent could be linked to the poetic tradition (cf. Sullivan 1964: 18) without his voice appearing subservient to the ancient model. Balmer is indebted to the Poundian usage of translation as a creative lens that allows the poet to articulate his/her own voice, a means of "writing out of the text into new poetry" (Sullivan 1964: 32) as well as a way to read afresh the ancient text.

In Balmer's two collections, translation and new poetry are complementary and *in fieri* activities, and the two kinds of texts are often juxtaposed or combined, resulting in a creative *continuum* that makes "translation and original each [spark] off the other" (2013a: 188). By recontextualising it into new poetry, translation also becomes itself a topic and a metaphor troping the narrativization and writing of grief. Both collections share elegiac themes. The central section of *Chasing Catullus* deals with the terminal illness and the death of the poet's seven-year-old niece through translations and new poems. *The Word for Sorrow* interweaves two narrative threads revolving around experiences of displacement: the first consisting of Balmer's versions of Ovid's exile poetry (the *Tristia* and *Epistulae Ex Ponto*, AD 8-17/18); the second of those poems dealing with Geoffrey and other British officers of the Gloucester Hussars, a yeomanry regiment that in April 1915 was posted to Gallipoli to fight against the Turks. The poet-translator's subjectivity is pervasive throughout, yet she is a shifting presence: she appears both as a creative agent, interacting with texts, memories, places, and objects, and a composite *persona* emerging from the dialogue among the several voices that can be "heard" in her collections – those of translator, mediator, innovator, decoder, creator of new and meaningful connections.

The notion of translation and the tropes it mobilizes, such as (self-)displacement and (self-)transformation, cut across literature and criticism. One of Salman Rushdie's most quoted *loci* on migration is the definition of the migrant as "a translated man", someone who "ha[s] been *borne across*" (1983: 29).



[M]igration also offers us one of the richest metaphors of our age. The very word *metaphor*, with its roots in the Greek words for *bearing across*, describes a sort of migration, the migration of ideas into images. Migrants – borne-across humans – are metaphorical beings in their very essence; and migration, seen as a metaphor, is everywhere around us. We all cross frontiers (Rushdie 1991: 278-279).

Rushdie rightly saw migration as a productive metaphor for the modern era. Later, the semantics of postcolonial theory deeply affected both Translation Studies and Classical Reception Studies. In the former field and in the light of globalization and mass migrations, translation – in its Latin root also conveying the ideas of movement and bearing across –, was no longer seen as

an instrument that stabilizes meaning, [...] a linear movement between two fixed meanings, [...] [but] as ‘a mutable mobile which operates within a topology of fluidity’ (Cronin 2006: 28). As a result, change, transformation, fragmentation, dislocation and cracks have become key coordinates for understanding the motion created by translation. (Kaindl 2014: 2)

Likewise, in the last decades, the dissemination of classical texts has increasingly been explored according to interpretive models that emphasize centrifugal and non-linear movement, in place of the unilateral concept of influence. No longer perceived as the exclusive property of a few Western elites, the “right” inheritors of that cultural legacy, in the twentieth century the classics and classical themes have become more and more ‘available’ through the larger access made possible in higher education as well as through new media. As a consequence of this ‘democratization’, new appropriations, relocations and intermedial hybridization have emerged<sup>1</sup>.

Migration troped as translation and *vice versa* have thus become in turn apt metaphors for modern poetics. In Balmer’s *Chasing Catullus* and *The Word for Sorrow* what is “borne across” is undoubtedly the classical text being translated, but also the writerly notion of the self. The emphasis Rushdie puts on the transformation resulting from the crossing of boundaries (“The journey creates us. We become the frontier we cross”, 2002: 410) is comparable to the role played by translation (and its transgression) in shaping Balmer’s poetics. Moreover, the relationship between translator and text is not one-sided: Balmer realized indeed that the translating/writing self and the classics are so dialectically intertwined that each acts as the lens filtering and refracting the other, suggesting, in other words, that “translation can infect the translator” (2013a: 177). The “infection” of which she speaks enhances her poetic voice, and bears witness to the complex dialogue between the poet-translator and the classical text. In this respect, Paschalis Nikolaou describes Balmer’s poetics as a form of “(life-) writing” that “capture[s] psycho-perceptual proceedings in reading and

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<sup>1</sup> Selected reference works in the field of classical reception dealing in depth with these topics, including both theory and case studies, are Hardwick 2000 and 2003; Martindale and Taylor (eds.) 2006; Hardwick and Stray (eds.) 2008; Hardwick and Harrison (eds.) 2013.



translation and manifest[s] how positions of translation commune with, and extend, the conditions of literary writing” (Nikolaou 2006: 106).

*The Word for Sorrow*, like other recent poetical works engaging with Ovid’s verse, shows a “particular attentiveness to the poet’s own relationship with Ovid, a tendency to make that relationship itself a subject for poetry” (Brown 2014: 451). Although the earlier collection is inspired by several classical texts (and a few modern ones), a similar tendency – the thematization of the poet’s attraction to a specific author or text – recurs in a number of poems. In *Chasing Catullus*, Balmer began exploring the classics in translation as distancing filters that could be overwritten with a new, autobiographical narrative, metamorphic spaces allowing the authorial self to “say the unsayable” (Balmer 2009b: 52-59), that is, to trace personal grief, as well as to experiment with the creative impulse. However, considering that in literature “all first-person narrative, is, of essence, artificial” (Balmer 2013a: 217), the lyrical “I” of her most overtly autobiographical poems is a personalized voice, as opposed to a personal one. T. S. Eliot theorized that the poet’s mind should be a medium and not the reflection of a personality; in her collections, Balmer’s creative mind surely appears as “a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images” (Eliot 1997: 45) in the act of uniting them “to form a new compound” (Eliot 1997: 45). The capacity to acknowledge the layering of both the individual and the literary past in the present moment, and to channel the simultaneous occurrence of all those particles through the poet’s mind results in a form of poetry that does not erase the “I” but which singles out the acts of reading and translating as those privileged moments in which the creative mind makes time present and times past synchronous. If translation requires a form of “negative capability” – the virtuosic craft of appropriating someone else’s perspective and voice by erasing, or disguising, the self –, for many poets, especially in times of crisis, it has represented, as Susan Bassnett beautifully puts it, “a form of autobiographical writing, a means of writing the self at one stage removed” (2014: 243). Balmer’s career started as a professional translator but these remarks seem appropriate to describe the continuous dialogue between translation and poetic (re)creation that she forges and makes visible in her two collections. For Balmer, classical translation is of necessity a matter of rewriting. Reading and translating, as well as viewing a picture and doing archival research, are not only preparatory stages in the creative process but experiences worthy to be subjects of poetry and consequently (re)encoded in new verse. It is in the act of reading *Medea* that the poet’s *persona* grapples with the unspeakable grief of those around her and in the act of finding the right translational equivalent that the translator discovers a geography of exile that connects an ancient poem to a modern military tragedy.

Self-reflexivity in fact does not obstruct the genuinely poetic but adds to the sense of interconnectedness of material and inner worlds, of memory, art and experience. Balmer implicitly acknowledges the layered nature of the writing self when she compares the “redrawing [of] the past” to “the overwriting of a palimpsest” (2004: 9). As my discussion of *The Word for Sorrow* will show, the distinction between the experiential and the personalized self is also relevant to Ovid’s exile poetry and to Balmer’s use of his narrative of displacement in combination with her Gallipoli poems.



## CHASING CATULLUS

Two modes of interaction with the classics will be discussed in relation to *Chasing Catullus*. The first strategy can be best observed in those poems revolving around the terminal illness and death of Balmer's seven-year-old niece. In poems such as "De Raptu Proserpinae" (28) and "Niobe" (29)<sup>2</sup>, private grief – the inarticulate text of personal loss – is overwritten and mediated through the classical text in translation, which is explicitly referenced by the name of the ancient author and, usually in endnotes, the titles and line numbers of the sources. Not least because of this information, the "primary" text the reader will recognize at once is the classical one; on the other hand, two voices clearly coexist in the same poetic space. In this respect, overall these poems are reminiscent of a Modernist strategy that can be traced back to Pound, but which most clearly emerges in relation to another "overwritten" Propertius. About Yeats's "A Thought from Propertius" (1915), J.P. Sullivan points out that "[i]t is easy to see how far this poem is from being a translation and yet how most of it is suggested in inspiration and detail by the Latin" (1964: 179).

The autobiographical dimension of these and other poems by Balmer can be located in textual "thresholds": it is coded in mythological titles, and in the dates and times appearing before the poems, which trace salient moments related to the poet's niece's illness until the moment of her death. This event is allusively presented in "De Raptu Proserpinae", a touching adaptation of lines 3.321-344 of the late antique epic of the same title by Claudian. Unlike the parallel Latin passage, in which Proserpina, with nymphs and three goddesses, gathers flowers near the mount Etna, from the first line of Balmer's poem Rachel/Proserpina is in the foreground ("Now she came to the hills [...] / At first light she picked her flowers"). Suddenly, the girl is abducted by an unknown "horseman [...] harbinger, camp-follower, or even Death Himself". The contrast between innocence and tragedy, light and darkness, and the way the latter set of oppositions seeps into the former are kept unaltered in Balmer's poem. However, while the Latin lines have a first-person narrator – Proserpina's nurse reporting the girl's abduction to Ceres (cf. Claudian, *De Raptu Proserpinae*, 3.240-241: *pallere ligustra, / expirare rosas, decrescere lilia vidi*)<sup>3</sup> –, Balmer's speaker uses instead the plural first-person pronoun to convey disorientation and despair at the arrival of the mysterious horseman and the withering of nature after he has left: "Their horseman we didn't know"; "lilies shrivelled before our eyes"; "Night scuttled after / as the light seeped back into our black world". If we keep the mythological subtext in view, this "we" refers to the nurse and the companions that escorted Proserpina, yet, more suggestively, in Balmer's translation, it embraces all humanity, struck by the sudden desolation that has fallen on the earth. The last line seals the irrevocable loss by addressing the girl's grieving mother: "and your small daughter nowhere to be seen".

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<sup>2</sup> Since Balmer's collections are discussed in two separate sections, the poems will be referenced only by page numbers throughout.

<sup>3</sup> The reference edition for Claudian's Latin text is Claudiano 2013.



"Niobe" is a compact nine-line piece, bearing the same date as the preceding poem, but a late time. Whereas imagery and wording are drawn from Sophocles – the acknowledged source is *Antigone*, 824-831 –, it is its title that immediately establishes a link with the previous poem and thus a narrative of loss, by conjuring the image of the mythological character mourning the death of all her children. The closing words of the poem pair with the last line of "De Raptu Proserpinae", as they address a mother who is now left speechless ("the sound of words you can't say"). Once again, the non-confessional approach to personal grief does not weaken the elegiac register, on the contrary it makes the unidentified speaker appear a helpless witness, as the powerless nurse of the preceding poem was. In both poems the recontextualization of grief in myth reveals that loss is an experience transcending the individual dimension, and which the classical text can help to put into a larger narrative. Likewise, "Set in Stone" (34) reinforces the idea of continuity by presenting a new original poem composed by Balmer for her niece on the model of ancient funerary inscriptions, placed after two anonymous epitaphs for children in translation. The locations and dates written under each epitaph – Egypt and Italy, c.300 AD and c.100 BC respectively, and Letchworth, 1996 – make loss appear painfully close and simultaneously part of a long tradition of voicing grief through poetry. These three poems and others, such as "Philomela" (22), "Demeter in Winter" (35) and "Letchworth Crematorium" (50), virtually carve out a space within the collection that explores maternal and feminine mourning by "constructing" sorrow as a palimpsestic emotion that is both inside and outside history.

"Cancel the Invite II" (33) encodes the thematization of the relationship between poet-translator and the activity of translation, because of the special significance the source text has for the authorial *persona*. This poem is inspired by "Plato via Eliot", but formally responds to its companion piece "Cancel the Invite I" (32), an original by Balmer. As it deals with the figure and the role of poets, the Platonic text (*Republic*, 398a) enables her to address the use of "such personal material [as] poetic subject-matter" (Balmer 2013a: 195), namely the public disclosure of her and her family's grief; T.S. Eliot's "Little Gidding" inspires instead the anaphoric opening ("If you came, if you came this way to our city") and the meditative tone. Thresholds are here as revealing as they are in other poems. The date hints at the days following Rachel's death; as for its title, whereas the invite in its companion poem refers to the birthday party that had to be cancelled because of the girl's illness and untimely death, in the second poem it alludes to the right of poets of being admitted to the Platonic ideal state: they cannot stay there and are politely shown the way out. The last six lines explain why they are *personae non gratae*:

and if you reached, by chance, our marbled market halls  
[...]  
then we'd welcome you as a stranger, as a guest,  
wash your dusty feet, throw fresh garlands round your neck,  
commend your art, revere your turncoat trickster's skill,  
and then, because poets are forbidden here by law –



for we need doctors, surgeons, men to find the cure –  
we'd show you, so politely, to the waiting door.

"Greek Tragedy" (24) provides an example of the second approach to the classical text mentioned above, in that it explicitly uses a translated passage metatextually to trace personal grief. By opening the central section of the collection, it overtly ushers in the elegiac tone and the narrative revolving around the child's illness. The presence of the autobiographical "I" does not result, however, in the unmediated, confessional record of private grief. Sorrow is worked through, instead, in the act of reading Euripides' *Medea*, which takes place while the poet is at the hospital where her niece is receiving cancer treatment (cf. Balmer 2013a: 184-185). The three loosely rhymed six-line stanzas of the poem mention the emotions of "pity", "fear", "catharsis" and structural elements of the Greek tragic genre ("peripeteia", "mimesis", "recognition scenes", "hubris" and "fatal flaw"). *Medea*, however, only in part allows the speaker to map the real-life tragedy onto the literary text, providing instead a contrast that, nonetheless, finally leads to catharsis. A translation of a few lines from *Medea*'s monologue, delivered shortly before she brutally murders her children (*Medea* 1240-49), apparently illustrate "not enough pity" on the ancient heroine's part and are likely to engender "too much fear" in the reader; they also hint at the inevitable fate that is about to fall on her children ("*no going back, the path's been shown*"). The inevitability of this event is subtly resisted by "masked faces" in the last stanza:

But we have Dads shaved in mimesis,  
mothers sharing recognition scenes,  
family life – or its catharsis –  
and now, on cue, your masked faces,  
stepping up to address her fatal flaw,  
the ones to sing out: *it shan't be so*.

On the other hand, this stanza links life and literature, with dads, mothers and families experiencing moments that are found in ancient Greek tragedies. The closing words of the poem are spoken by what Balmer describes as "the (ultimately powerless) chorus" consisting of "all the poem's protagonists – the shattered families attempting to come to terms with the trauma of a child's diagnosis of cancer" (Balmer 2013a: 184). It is no coincidence that Balmer mentions a chorus: in Euripides' tragedy, *Medea*'s soliloquy is followed by the chorus' strophe in which they pray the Sun-god to prevent the woman from accomplishing the brutal murder. In "Greek Tragedy", the dialogue between classical text and life, between translation and new poetry is thus a complex one, grafting on to real-life experience and involving parallels and resistance. No sublimation or revision of the archetypal cruel mother is offered, on the contrary the image of *Medea* as a "cold-blooded killer" (Balmer 2013a: 184) is reinstated as part of the poet's perhaps cathartic encounter with the ancient tragedy during those difficult days.



A poem that playfully engages with the theme of translation, offering the reader a brilliant “cross-section of the literate mind” (Nikolaou 2006: 103), is the collection’s title poem (21):

It’s the rule of attraction, the corruption of texts,  
the way his corpus tastes of skin and sweat,  
the taint of decay, scent of cheated death.

But then, I’ve always liked them old –  
parsed hearts, lost minds, redundant souls;  
just enough to get me fleshing ghosts,  
giving them tongue, jumping their bones.

Yet sleep with the dead and you’ll wake  
with the worms – stripped down, compressed,  
a little accusative, slightly stressed – to find  
the code you crack, the clause that breaks,  
is no longer subordinate, it’s now your own.

In keeping with the erotic undertone, the poet-translator’s work on classical texts is figured here as a physical and slightly perverse relationship. The irony is probably fully got by classical scholars and philologists, who are familiar with texts badly preserved, damaged papyri and manuscripts, and corresponding reconstruction hypotheses. The first impulse of the poet-translator, though, is to make the ancient text readable, its voice heard anew; a fact that, as Balmer’s notices, is often overlooked within classical scholarship, whose “intellectual hierarchy [...] ranks textual philology at the top and ‘translation cribs’ at the bottom” (Balmer 2009b: 43). This poem thus reads as a programmatic statement on translation seen as “[an] asserting rather than derivative activity” (Hooley 1988: 15) and, in particular, it vindicates the right of the translator to creatively appropriate its material. By this process of “[f]leshing ghosts” and “giving them tongue”, Balmer enacts a form of prosopopeia: while a classical text can be described as “silent” for those who do not read Greek and Latin (the translator’s primary readership), the gesture of voicing deceased or missed soldiers in the First World War – what Balmer does in her next collection –, can certainly be seen as a way to make the absent speak.

### *THE WORD FOR SORROW*

The prominence given in *Chasing Catullus* to the relationship between different subject positions, including the writing self’s, and the inscribing of grief throws light on the choice in *The Word for Sorrow* of engaging with Ovid’s exile poetry. Geographical proximity between Gallipoli and Tomis, Ovid’s place of exile, provides the most evident link with the narrative thread about the Dardanelles campaign. Beyond that, however, the choice of Ovid is not conventional for a poetic treatment of





war. In spite of the success the *Tristia* and *Epistulae Ex Ponto* enjoyed among poets and novelists of the twentieth century<sup>4</sup>, neither Ovid's exilic *persona*, nor his exile works represented archetypal models for the soldiers who wrote from the trenches; the Homeric epic and the Trojan war provided instead a poetic archive of *topoi* and imagery that were largely available to soldiers from disparate social classes fighting at Gallipoli as well as on the Western front (cf. Vandiver 2010: 228-277).

As her selections show, what drew Balmer to the *Tristia* and *Epistulae Ex Ponto* were neither the dissident poet, nor the counter-hegemonic strand of his verse – two themes that fascinated many intellectual exiles of the last century. The suffering, self-pitying Ovid, the deceiving immediacy of his tone and the artfulness and elusiveness of his *persona* were the aspects that most captivated Balmer. By an act of transgressive cross-voicing, Balmer steps into the realm of war as a woman poet who speaks about and ventriloquizes the perspective of a British soldier and gives it further resonance through the prism of Ovid's most 'autobiographical' poetry. Although the lens of gender is not prominent in the collection, in an interview Balmer hints at its presence and, more importantly, mentions autobiographical and class elements influencing her approach to the First World War material: "which of us has a history family untouched by the devastation of 1914-1918?" the poet asks (2009a: xvii). Members of her family served in the war but, unlike the anonymous soldier of *The Word for Sorrow*, they belonged to the working class and Latin was not part of their world (cf. Balmer 2013b). A Latin dictionary bought second-hand and once owned by Geoffrey (the fictive name Balmer chooses for the soldier), is the object triggering the war narrative and providing a bridge to the Ovid poems.

Serendipity, analogies and contrasts between literature and life play a role in Balmer's inspiration and poetics. Like *Chasing Catullus*, the 2009 collection is among those literary experiments admitting "literary translators' often unspoken parallel lives as writers through the forging of new literary contexts and positions" (Nikolaou-Kyritsi 2008: 7). Whereas private grief is no longer the irradiating focus, a few poems in *The Word for Sorrow* are inspired by objects and other events related to Balmer's family history at the time of the First World War (cf. "The Penny Pot", 43) and by her research visits to war memorials (cf. "Among the Graves: Green Hill, Gallipoli", 21; "Among the Graves: Ampney Crucis", 35). As a matter of fact, the elegiac theme is here focalized through a more self-conscious and distanced perspective, which foregrounds literary constructedness and transhistorical connections. The two narrative threads share the motifs of displacement and loss – of a city, youth, family, innocence –, as well as changes in tone and register – the combination of despair and irony, complaint and comedy, horror and sudden bathos (cf. Balmer 2009: xviii; Balmer 2013: 218-9). Ultimately, both tell the story of a slow descent into a world of loneliness and barbarity, whether it be the territory Ovid hyperbolically describes as constantly threatened by hostile neighbouring tribes, or the bloodshed of the war and the exhausting stalemate in the trenches. While Ovid's highly crafted poetry might appear

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<sup>4</sup> On the reception of Ovid's exile poetry in the last century, in Anglophone writers and others, cf. Ingleheart (ed.) 2011: 207-321 (contributions by various scholars) and Ziolkowski 2005: 67-73, 99-145.



to be at the far end from the Gallipoli poems – since they are supposedly based on more historically reliable material –, the war narrative also results from Balmer's *poiesis*: the diaristic, biographical and documentary sources she consulted, and which the reader finds listed in the "Sources and Resources" section, are selected, assembled and recontextualized in her collages and new poems. Ovid's two exile books are also included in the same list; poetry and documentary sources standing thus next to each other just as the Latin poet's and the soldiers' voices are juxtaposed within the collection, both borne across, translated, on the page.

Furthermore, Ovid's sophisticated construction of his exilic self does not prevent Balmer from creating her own "Ovid", who in *The Word for Sorrow* becomes a poetic palimpsest through which other forms of grief can be mediated and refracted. In this respect, Balmer's technique does not consist in radical rewriting of Ovid's lines, nor in other particular subversive approaches to translation. Abridgments and editing were nonetheless necessary, and were motivated by space and narrative reasons, but novelty rather stems here from changes in the sequence of the elegies, juxtaposition, verbal and tonal cross-references between the two narratives and the use throughout of the *cognomen* "Naso" in place of "Ovid", the former being also the name he calls himself in his poetry. Significantly, just as the Gallipoli poems often appear fragmentary and impressionistic, Balmer's Ovid sometimes shares this provisionality, which adds to the constructedness of his *persona*, as if his voice came indeed from a second level of fictionality: that of "a translator's notebook, [a] detailed sketch[...] before the finished original [...]; [a] snap-shot[...] of a work in progress" (Balmer 2009: XVI).

Once again, the activity of translation is both a topic and a trope, which bridges the two narratives. As in *Chasing Catullus*, a number of poems in the later collection are metatranslational, and focus on the tools of the trade. For instance, in "Hail" (4) and "Dancing in the Dark" (6) Balmer retraces the first steps of her research by portraying herself while she is working on Ovid's text; then, she turns her attention to the old dictionary, and the initials inked on its flyleaf, which will eventually put her on the track of a young soldier who was likely to be just out of grammar school when he joined the Army ("school Latin forgotten, for now, at least", 6). Here, the activity of translation engenders moments of frustration as neither the web nor more traditional resources are of great help for the poet-translator: "Perseus can't save the day, / no help now from latinvocabdotcom. / no hope but to return to the old addiction; / I slide the book down softly from the shelf" ("Hail")<sup>5</sup>. In "Dancing in the Dark" Balmer elaborates on the motif of the writer (translator)'s block by quoting famous lines from *Epistulae Ex Ponto* 4 (2.32-34) in which Ovid complains about his lack of inspiration, caused by the frustration of not having an audience.

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<sup>5</sup> *Perseus* is an open-access digital library containing collections of ancient literary texts and other documents in Greek, Latin, Arabic and Germanic languages and some English translations, as well as catalogues of art objects and archaeological sites with pictures and descriptions (<[www.perseus.tufts.edu](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu)>).



For days now I've been stumbling after,  
chasing down words just beyond reach,  
searching for agreement, unpicking order,  
trying not to tread on toes (or feet)

to keep up, as ever, with his deft repartee:  
*Writing poems that no one will read,*  
Naso sighed, *is like dancing in the dark,*  
*the gesture no one sees you make —*

shame I can't find it in this stiff dictionary.  
(6)

As a matter of fact, the Ovidian *locus* (italicized in Balmer's poem) can be turned on its head since, as Peter Green points out, "[it] throws off one of the most memorable images in the entire exilic corpus [*sive quod in tenebris numerosos ponere gestus, / quodque legas nulli scribere carmen, idem est*] [...]. However true, and debilitating, the evil circumstances of which Ovid complains, no one capable of coining a phrase like that can convincingly claim poetic exhaustion" (Green 2005: 352). In "Hail" and "Dancing in the Dark" the activity of translation unpredictably leads Balmer to a journey backwards into recent European history. In addition, these two poems and the activities they describe – translating and (not) finding the right words and the soldier's name – self-reflexively introduce us to the moment in which the seemingly unrelated discourses of translation, poetry and history start to intersect: in other words, they tell about the inception of *The Word for Sorrow*. More subtly, Balmer captures the interstitial spaces opened up by the translation activity – "*the gesture no one sees you make*" –, and hints thus at the fact that much of her own poetry arises from those invisible gestures.

Once again the dictionary represents a crucible of worlds in "Dictionary Definitions" (31), which reads as a meditation on war via the research of the appropriate English equivalents for words from *Tristia* 4.2 that are related to slaughter and mourning (*caedes, cruor, lugubria*). "The idea of using a gloss in a poetic way, or a definition in a poetic way" (Balmer: 2013b) is a strategy the poet had used in *Chasing Catullus*, for instance in "Greek Tragedy", and which allows the reader to see how translation is conducive to unpredictable connections with other poetic material. Like "Dancing in the Dark", the text seamlessly becomes metatext. The first five lines are italicized, this indicating a quotation or a translation inserted into a new poem:

*Construct the landscape of slaughter:  
lakes, hills, forts, flesh-clogged river.  
The Rhine, too, fractured, splintered,  
dammed with bodies and running red  
with its own blood...*



In this case, however, it is Balmer, not Ovid, who “construct[s] the landscape of slaughter” by editing and compressing lines 37-43 from *Tristia* 4.2 (lines 2 to 5 in the above quotation), in which Ovid acclaims a Roman victory over Germany. Since he never saw the scene of triumph he so vividly describes and which he rather intended as an ecomium for Emperor Tiberius (cf. Green 2005: 257), the martial landscape is constructed twice, once by Ovid, and once by Balmer’s imagination, by juxtaposition and echoes to her own original war poems. “Dictionary Definitions” is an example of “Ovid seeping into [Balmer’s] Gallipoli poems” (Balmer 2009a: xv): the translated lines are indeed reminiscent of war scenarios at Gallipoli, such as those evoked in “Landed” (15) and “Knocking at the Door” (19).

The “negative capability” of the professional translator that emerges in the Ovid poems as a matter of fact disguises the writerly construction of her textual world. The veracity of the experience of displacement and the displacement of grief into poetry are foregrounded in the way the two narratives speak to and resonate in each other through cross-textual echoes. These cross-references reveal the similar fate of the collection’s protagonists: any hope in the future is forestalled and self-memorializing becomes a form of survival. For instance, in “Naso’s Last Night” (7) Ovid’s description of himself as “a corpse too early for its own wake, / carried out for burial” recalls the funerary imagery used in a number of war poems. The initial words of “Business” (12) are “End of Empire. Dominions shrunk / to a rattled bay, world cupped in a cove / [...] nowhere left to conquer, no other way to go...”; these lines sound like a veiled critique of the war enterprise on the poet-translator’s part in the context of the arrival of the British soldiers in Gallipoli, but they might as well be referred to Ovid’s Tomis, a border territory, indeed a distant “dominion” of the nascent Roman Empire (which Ovid himself describes in similar terms in *Tristia* 2.199-200). In “Naso’s Back Story” (38), based on the famous tenth elegy of *Tristia* 4, Ovid asserts his enduring devotion to his poetic Muse, the only comfort left to him: “Here, where the clash of combat echoes, / I still write, find the word for sorrow” (39). Although the line *Hic ego finitimis quamvis circumsoner armis* (*Tristia*, 4.10.111)<sup>6</sup> refers to warlike tribes around Tomis, those words, spoken by a lonely man from an inhospitable place and with “the clash of combat” not too far, might have been uttered by a soldier writing a letter home.

These cross-allusions and the great attention Balmer pays to narrative sequence result in an increasing blurring of boundaries between poetic and historical truth. The complex relationship between them is already present in Ovid’s exilic poetry and has been explored in corresponding scholarship: despite the historical names, dates and documentation on religious rites and legal practices they contain, the *Tristia* and *Epistulae Ex Ponto* do not provide historical evidence on Ovid’s exile. These works remain a “poetic place, a literary construct deeply informed by an actual reality” (McGowan 2009: 19). According to Gianpiero Rosati, Ovid’s exile works are not mimetic but create a reality in its own right, distinct from but complementary to the experiential, historical one (cf. Rosati 1979; McGowan 2009: 25-36). History is not

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<sup>6</sup> The Latin quotations from the *Tristia* and *Epistulae Ex Ponto* are from Publio Ovidio Nasone (1986) and will be referenced only by book, number of the individual poem and line numbers.



banished from this cultivated world of verse; however, like Ovid's scripted self and his narrative of displacement, it is entirely dependent on the interpretive lens of the writing subject, who asserts the poet's right to coopt and transform reality<sup>7</sup>. Ovid's poetic truth is an artist's reflection in a time of political transition; behind his version, the factual reasons and circumstances of his exile are irretrievable and, ultimately, unimportant. Two thousand years later, Salman Rushdie would highlight the fundamental role played by fiction, and literature more generally, in specific historical moments in which reality – the shared, commonly accepted narrative of what reality is – is counterfeited by political lies; under these circumstances, literature can offer a counter-weight, and, by taking advantage of its special ontological status, create "lies that tell the truth" (Rushdie 2000: 73). One would argue that, in cases such as Ovid's, poetry does indeed bear witness to the impact caused by historical events upon the destinies of individual men. This complementarity is relevant to Balmer's Gallipoli poems too. As noted above, both narrative threads ultimately result from poetic reconstruction: the writer re-semanticizes two different textual worlds that, for her, provide "evidence" for an exploration of human suffering. In addition, although on the whole they are more focussed on single events, either reported by an eye-witness or narrated in the past tense, rather than providing meditations on the war, the Gallipoli poems now and then remind of reflections and imagery of the kind found in British war poetry: the futility of the countless deaths that have become part of a daily routine; the description of both the living and the dead soldiers as ghosts or ghost-like figures; the poignant contrast between the blank faces of the corpses staring at the living and the sudden longing for "home" and "our British warm" (cf. "Landed", 15; "Digging in", 23).

As a matter of fact, the issue of poetic truth appears early in the collection, and proves that Balmer's central concern throughout is indeed the nature of verse and the way it captures and "translates" the self. Predictably, this concern obliquely surfaces within the Ovidian thread. "Naso's Book Back in Rome" (1), based on *Tristia* 1.1, and "Naso Off the Shelf" (16), based on *Tristia* 3.1 are a case in point. In the latter, Ovid dreams that his new book visits the city it has never seen but it suffers a fate comparable to that of its author: it is not admitted to the public libraries. The last lines are Balmer's interpolation: "Poetry must, poetry *can* only tell the truth. / In life we have to lie to stay alive". They validate Ovid's, and Balmer's, poetic constructions as veritable inscriptions of displacement and sorrow, while asserting that lies, self-deceit, are perhaps a necessary protection when life is threatened. In "Naso's Book Back in Rome",

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Rosati (1979: 106): "La poesia non è docile testimone del reale, dell'esistente: essa rivendica a sé il diritto di sottoporre alle sue leggi anche la realtà di cui essa si nutre, di rendere quella realtà letteratura. [...] Ciò che Ovidio afferma [...] non è tanto un rifiuto della poesia di accogliere in sé il reale, di fare spazio alle cose della vita, bensì la sua ostinata determinazione a non farsene tiranneggiare. Egli non si cura di negare in assoluto un'osmosi tra realtà e letteratura: protesta però il diritto di quest'ultima all'infedeltà, alla *licentia*, alla *phantasia*. Una volta rivendicato alla poesia il diritto di ripudiare la mimesi, essa non sarà anzi renitente ad assumere in sé la realtà: essa si impadronirà del reale, del *verum*, e sottoponendolo alle proprie leggi lo snaturerà (ne farà appunto letteratura): quale modo migliore di questo per rovesciare l'antica sudditanza e vantare la libertà conquistata?".



before sending it to Rome, Ovid gives his book instructions about what it will reply to those who might judge his exile poetry inferior to his other works. The book will have to remind them that “poetry should be drawn down from clear cold skies / not scrawled under clouds in the eye of the storm; / poetry requires calm, quiet recollection” and that “[p]oetry writes without fear: words can’t be coaxed / when the knife is always pricking at your throat”.

The self-portrait of the poet while he is writing in circumstances like those described in the lines above, indeed opposite to his old, urbane “recollection in tranquillity”, is a recurring motif in *Tristia* 1. In particular, the wild sea and the storm during the journey are the first of a series of physical and psychological hardships Ovid will suffer in his exile (the cold, the desolate place, the city constantly threatened by barbarians, linguistic isolation, etc.). They are traditional motifs in the epic and the elegiac genre, which he redeploys to forge analogies with his adverse fate on the one hand, and his troubled soul on the other. The literariness of the stormy sea does not lessen, on the contrary, it makes more pathetic and persuasive the representation of his misery. “Don’t judge what my lines might weigh, just where they are” (“Naso Lost for Words”, 27), says Ovid apologetically. Being the sources of his despair, those circumstances also represent the indispensable poetic geography of his writing self. As figured in his lines, his poetry and the forbidding place of his exile become coextensive, one literally spilling over the other. This interconnectedness of the two realms is foregrounded early in the *Tristia* (cf. *Tristia* 1.11, 9-10, 17-18, 34, 40) and is not missed by Balmer, whose Ovid is “amazed that in *depths of sea – and spirit – / productivity did not weaken, far from it*” and begs the reader to overlook the flaws in his lines “[f]or they’re no longer written in shady gardens / where my soft couch offered support, contemplation, / but were drawn from the deep at ebb of dying year / *as salt-spray blotted page, dark cerulean blur*” (“Naso Sees the End of the Beginning”, 11, my italics).

The Ovid who writes that *carmina proveniunt animo deducta sereno* and that *carminibus metus omnis abest* (*Tristia*, 1.1.39; 43) might have agreed with Yeats when the Irish poet says that “Labour is blossoming or dancing where / The body is not bruised to pleasure the soul, / Nor beauty born out of its own despair” (“Among School Children” 1928, 57-59). Part of the paradox – and indeed of Ovid’s subtle “poetics of illusion”, to borrow Philip Hardie’s title (cf. Hardie 2002) – rests on the fact that in the *Tristia*, paraphrasing Yeats’s famous lines, labour does blossom or dance where the body is bruised, and beauty is born out of its own despair. Just as poetic *labor* and the stormy sea are inextricably bound together in Ovid’s *Tristia*, so the place and his anguish are the stuff his poetic landscape is made of. After all, the rhetorical question Yeats asks holds true for Ovid’s exile poetry too: “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” (“Among School Children”, 64). The point, indeed, is not to distinguish the historical Ovid from his exilic poetry, but to see that “Ovid’s exilic poetry” is a veritable space that can be inhabited and, in turn, placed next to the war poems, the other “word for sorrow” that is created by Balmer’s imagination. Halfway through the collection, Balmer’s *persona* portrays herself as a detective who has lost track of her two characters: “Geoffrey’s disappeared without a trace. / As for Naso, he’s too tricky,



no bloody help" ("Thread", 28). In neither case, historical sources have kept record of the two men's destinies; besides, the poet knows that Ovid is not to be trusted if one is looking for facts and answers. "Does it matter if the journey exists / only in a captive's imagination?" (45), Balmer finally asks in the title poem. The answer leads us back to the idea that poetry can only tell the truth, as long as the creative mind lives in and speaks through it.

Historical accuracy, indeed, becomes less and less important. The last poem, "The Word for Sorrow" (45), conveys a meditation on the textual journey Balmer has undertaken. It deals with the same topic as "Cancel the Invite II", that is, the right to appropriate and reimagine others' lives and pasts, yet the poet's stance has now changed. She seems to cast off all masks by writing her own name and a date, presumably on the dictionary, in a gesture that both signals self-disclosure and claims authorship over her poetic material:

On the fly leaf I've written  
my new date, my own name:  
*Josephine Balmer, January 6<sup>th</sup> 2005*  
Do we find a text or does it find us?

The interesection of personal, literary and historical memory makes this poem one of the most confessional in the collection. At the same time, this confessional speaker ponders the issue of the fictionality or imaginative reconstructedness of poetic truth.

Does it matter if the journey exists  
only in a captive's imagination  
or the arch of a writer's eyebrow?  
If Naso tricked us, never left Rome;  
if 'Geoffrey's' story isn't all his own?  
And would I like them if we'd met [?]

The poet alludes to, and ultimately dismisses, the debate about the factuality of Ovid's relegation, according to which the exiled poet would be the last *persona* of Ovid the conjurer of shapes and artistic presences, who never left Rome and pretended to write as if he were among barbarians, on a far coast of the empire<sup>8</sup>.

Factual reality is not irrelevant to the Gallipoli poems, quite the opposite. Nevertheless, although Geoffrey's story is based on accurate research, it requires an effort of the imagination – what Balmer actually did with great sensitivity and poetic skill – and includes degrees of fictionality. His name was invented by the poet, his letter borrows other soldiers' words (cf. "Between the Lines", 17; and corresponding endnote, 52) and, overall, he becomes plural, a name for the many voices of Gallipoli that people Balmer's collection. The dedication of the book to the memory of Edward

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<sup>8</sup> For a brief overview of this thesis and further references, see Claassen (2008: 229-230) and McGowan (2009: 20 and n.18).



Balmer, who died in Salonica on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1918, provides a further link between the world of *The Word for Sorrow* and history. Yet Balmer's intent rather seems to assert the enduring power of poetic language to recreate and thus keep alive individual and historical memory. Ultimately, the poet cannot tell "if these shades I summon / thank or curse me, condone or condemn" (46) and is well aware that "my words are not their words". The respectful dialogue she has established with Ovid's and the soldiers' "shades", however, seems to legitimize her imaginative appropriation. The answer Balmer gives to herself is the line "but every past must have a present"; hence proclaiming that "their matter is now my matter".

## CONCLUSION

A journey of self-discovery is evinced from Balmer's two collections. By glossing her hybrid texts in the subtitle of *Chasing Catullus* as "transgressions" (Balmer: 2004), the poet acknowledges the porous nature of translation, its capacity of fostering a dialogue among many voices and within the translating self. Just as Rushdie's migrant subject becomes the frontier s/he crosses, so Balmer's translator is "infected" by translation, and the text s/he inhabits, supposedly as an invisible mediator, ends up shaping his/her poetic voice. If Fernando Pessoa called the poet a pretender and, according to a famous saying, the translator is a traitor, neither position is eluded by Balmer; on the contrary, the role of the poet-translator is explored in poems such as "Cancel the Invite II" and "The Word for Sorrow". Ultimately, for Balmer the poet-translator is someone who cannot but tell the truth. This means that, since poetry and translation are layered, pliable spaces in which many voices, and many selves, coexist, they are also forms of silent life-writing.

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