The AALITRA Review

A JOURNAL OF LITERARY TRANSLATION
No. 9, November 2014

Website: http://aalitra.org.au/

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Paschalis Nikolaou

To cite this Article:
Paschalis Nikolaou, "Classical Translation and Poetic Work from Simon Armitage, Josephine Balmer, Stanley Lombardo and Alice Oswald", *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation*, No. 9 (Melbourne: Monash University, 2014), pp.53-61.

Published by
MONASH UNIVERSITY

Resonant Scenes: Classical Translation and Poetic Work from Simon Armitage, Josephine Balmer, Anne Carson, Stanley Lombardo and Alice Oswald

PASCHALIS NIKOLAOU
Ionian University

Homer. *The Odyssey: A Dramatic Retelling of Homer's Epic.* Translated by Simon Armitage. New York / London: W. W. Norton, 2008. [London: Faber and Faber, 2006].

Virgil. *Aeneid*. Translated by Stanley Lombardo. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2005.

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Concerted re-appearances of ancient poetry and drama in the first few years of the twenty-first century suggest to us a self-seeing, a grasp at continuity; arguably any work on and with a literature of the past – be it in a language that is foreign, native or dead – exists also as a search for more stable points from which to observe and contextualize the present. In the case of classical literature: how many *Antigones* across history? To what extent do we still inhabit an Iliadic world? This sense becomes even clearer when a diversity of translational approaches, novel ways in and out of the ancient source material, help align us with a more complete understanding. Translation thus becomes a sort of panopticon.

The bibliographical information listed at the start of this review essay already hints at this variety. It is important to state that all these publications sample a much wider production, yet they are striking examples in the way they manage to re-energize ancient authors, as "old" content re-attaches to contemporary cadences and frames. Bringing together here some of these (re-)presentations of ancient Greek and Roman literature nevertheless illuminates a number of fascinating dispositions and tonalities of translation as we observe (poet-)translators responding to Aeschylus or Ovid, and the ways they choose to continue a dialogue with works as indelible and monumental as the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*. And when translation itself is re-thought in the process, allowing one to speak of "adaptation" or "appropriation", there too, one encounters interesting reasons and resonances; fruitful modes of what is also literary work.

In many ways it is apt that a literature at first oral in nature should in modern times often be accessed from the radio dial. Over a weekend in the late summer of 2004, a version of the *Odyssey* done by Simon Armitage was broadcast on BBC Radio 4. The script of this commission as it was published two years later bore the subtitle "a dramatic retelling of Homer's epic". A necessary emphasis emerges and informs the translator's choices here, yet entails various complications: the speech of epic poetry, as eventually written down, does not readily coincide

with what is deemed speakable in today's world. As Armitage himself explains, much of the *Odyssey* is written as narrated poem, so

> when characters do enter into discourse, it tends to be with formal speech, rather than what we might call dialogue. Faced with that situation, the role of the dramatist is to transform such narration into a series of conversations and exchanges, and to actualize some of its unspoken intentions by putting speech into characters' mouths. In other words, to get people to talk.
>
> (Armitage, Introduction, v)

Obviously, this already sets off significant adjustments to the original text, but Armitage is keenly aware of purpose, medium and audience. He is thus able to contain any transformations to the levels appropriate. His "retelling" of Homer is not distracted by licenses of the more creative kind – and is all the more successful for it. The poet-translator even proceeds to critique excessive modernizing – Armitage quips that this version is not "set on a housing estate in Salford" – that fails to realize the power of myth to enable resonances without the translator having to ram analogies inside readers' heads. So we do not come across anachronisms that teleport past into present – yet the language is undeniably modern, the dialogues are patterned on everyday speech and pursue plausibility (to the extent possible), the arguments and exchanges are spirited and playful. A sensitivity to the workings and effects of language can be expected from a poet of Armitage's abilities, and a brief of simplicity and speakability does not imply indolence on that front: we often come across subtle discoveries of rhythm and sound (in "The Lotus Eaters" episode, we hear Eurybates report to his King, Odysseus, "Such smoothness enters the mind. / Colours are endless and limitless" to which Antiphus adds how he feels "a vast, velvet pleasantness", 78). Many such decisions in lexis and phrasing – not too bold, but carefully considered – are now more fully savoured in the act of reading.

Armitage's most decided intervention is the organizing of the action into three parts (with the last one occupied solely by events upon Odysseus' return to Ithaca), in turn subdivided into brief chapters that follow the action, with the titles (e.g. "Odysseus and His Army At Sea" or "In The Palace of The Phaeacians") serving to locate us in place or centring around characters. From there usually it is straight into dialogue, with a minimum of stage directions and description, as happens in the amusing opening of "Circe".

> *Odysseus and the last of his men on land on Aeaea. They are seated around a camp-fire, eating a meal on the beach.*
>
> ELPENOS
> This is the sweetest food.
>
> EURYBATES
> Yes, stag. I feel big when I've eaten stag.
>
> ELPENOS
> I know what you mean – as if you've eaten its spirit as well. As if the ghost of the stag enters the blood, making you fearless and proud. Like you're the king of the woods.
>
> EURYBATES
> I just meant it's very filling, that's all.
>
> (Armitage, 111)

At the end of his Introduction, Armitage admits to hoping that the "script" may have a "further life" as a piece of writing. His *Odyssey* isn't exactly a proper translation, nor would we necessarily place it among the classic revisitings of Homer – it remains too self-consciously modest and "functional" for that. But Armitage's primary goal of reviving the *Odyssey* as drama is realized with level-headedness; the morality and dilemmas of a past age are clearly communicated, the voices hold our attention, our sympathies with Gods and humans are gained. Given exactly the notable oral energies of Armitage's "script", there is an issue perhaps – more so than in other similar publications – in the sense that the reader is likely to feel the experience is incomplete without an accompanying disc of the original BBC Radio performance. This *is* available separately; and one can understand how these are simple matters of cost/profit more than anything else: but this *Odyssey* is definitely a case where a complete package would do more justice to Armitage's craftsmanship, a poet who has in the space of a few years turned into one of the most prominent British poet-translators after Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney. It is worth mentioning in this sense that Armitage's Homer for the radio is followed by his work on the Anglo-Saxon *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Death of King Arthur*, which appeared in 2006 and 2012 respectively, before his return to Homer with a theatrical treatment of the *Iliad* as *The Last Days of Troy*; this premiered at London's Royal Exchange Theatre in late Spring of 2014.

Compared to the structural and tonal adjustments Armitage the translator-dramatist effects to an *Odyssey*, Stanley Lombardo's translation of the *Aeneid* is a far more literal affair. In many respects it is the "proper" approach to ancient authors that we see exemplified here: in the hands of a scholar-translator (Lombardo is Professor of Classics at the University of Kansas), Virgil's opus is added to a long line of classical texts done into English, notably among those the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (in 1997 and 2000 respectively), but also works by Hesiod, Sappho and, more recently, Ovid (the *Metamorphoses,* 2011). This list does little to indicate affinity to a specific author, work or period: rather, Lombardo's is an ongoing project indebted to the cultural and philological legacies of the classical world; he, the translator, is dedicated to the dissemination and re-reading of its literary cornerstones. The path adopted here, as in the case of other classicists like Fagles or Lattimore, leads to "correct and unmediated" contact with antiquity; this would be a translation fortified with paratexts further explaining to us meanings, morals and movements on the map. Yet, though no space for more creative flourishes is allowed, we do notice certain "updates" even to this more traditional approach: the quotes on the back cover (all given by Professors of Classics) praise the narrative pace and oral qualities of this *Aeneid*, highlighting not so much fidelity to the original but those elements that whisper relevance to the present. While scholarly values and the scale and seriousness of the undertaking are never downplayed, the front cover and the publisher's choice of image – in line with some of Lombardo's previous translations – further verify certain shifts in the marketing and reception of such editions, and remind us, not least, how significant, though often overlooked, is the visual situating of a translation, the indexes of time and place elected. And so our first impression of Lombardo's Virgil is a detail from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, DC, with the names of dead soldiers carved in granite.

Analogies of this kind are also drawn in the course of W. R. Johnson's long and detailed Introduction to the text, but Lombardo's own priorities, established and continuing from his previous commissions prompt this attitude, too. In prefatory notes, he confirms the use, once more, of the line he developed in response to the dactylic hexameter, based on natural speech cadences as found in much of modern English and American poetry; this aligns with translating the *Aeneid*, as a long poem which was still meant be recited; though, compared to earlier epics Lombardo has been occupied with, it is a less than perfect fit. Instead of modulations effected through many, many years of recitations (and a long series of bards) before it was set down in writing and attributed to one Homer, the *Aeneid* is a far more self-aware, literate work. The Roman poet is mindful of oral delivery but composition happens solely in writing and with an eye to earlier epics that serve as models. Places and relations within a literary tradition are carefully estimated. This more polished, "Augustan" nature of the *Aeneid* is recognized of course, via

T. S. Eliot; yet Lombardo again confidently breaks with the usual "scriptorium" approach and emphatically inserts the oral dimension in the translation process; he composes his version in parts, testing its effectiveness in performances whereby interaction with an audience also helps shape the translating. The break from the customary isolation and the feedback from listeners, readers and fellow classicists will remind us of priorities and practices more pronounced in creative approaches to translating. This more interactive manner of work does not always match the demands of the original when it comes to classical works – and in Lombardo's case, the results from this process are perhaps better seen in his *Iliad* (1997) than here. Yet the practice itself is very much worth arguing for.

A more composite proposal of classical translation comes courtesy of Canadian poet Anne Carson. She explains in her introductory note how this indefinite-article, "non-foundational" *Oresteia* results from the coming together of three different dramatists, and how this volume exists as a contemporary response to Aeschylus's trilogy. But in *An Oresteia* the realities of ancient drama are even more fully imagined, and the associations it provokes in us, intensely explored. The volume starts off with Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* (part of the original trilogy), then jump-cuts to Sophocles' *Elektra*, and closes with Euripides' *Orestes* (written about a hundred years later): these three plays encompass changed situations within historical time, ones that not least altered culture, consciousness and dramatic art. And indeed engagement with these works was also initiated at different points in time, with translations serving different purposes, too (one was originally included in a series by OUP, another commissioned for theatrical performance in New York), before eventually Brian Kulick, artistic director with New York City's Classic Stage Company, came up with the idea to synchronize them – the point being to highlight "the movement from myth to mockery". This assembly immediately multiplies meanings, because shifting frames of mind are lined up, and translation inevitably offers cross-sections of a culture as it progresses (rather than simply attempting an interlinguistic representation of one author/work). Carson's *An Oresteia* realizes unexpected linkages and returns to known scenes and landscapes; it underscores the overlaps and distances in style or stagecraft and marches past the knowing reader different copies of the same characters and their moral dilemmas. It is this radical alignment that sheds light both on the entirety of what is called "the Athenian moment" and the development of ancient drama.

In this way too, one might argue that *An Oresteia* forms a sort of lesson in literary anthropology: arguments are formed and conclusions drawn in ways far more prismatic than in encountering these plays in isolation, or properly sequenced by a scholar-translator. But the modern poet is more able to act differently. Approaches like Carson's do not spell out understandings but *quicken* them; hermeneutical leaps result through a more *literary* disposition to translation. What is more, this disposition is not merely reflected in the originality of *An Oresteia*'s arrangement, the clarity with which protagonists' motives and predicaments are rendered, or an increased sensitivity to the sound of language(s), leading to choices which can comfortably be labelled subjective (Carson is laconic where fewer words intensify the dialogue, carefully attends to line breaks if these will intone character or crisis). The brief Introductions to each play are equally moving, and one would argue, very much part of the fabric of these translations. A poet's eye is cast on proceedings, and a literary perception is what guides and expresses the entry points into Aeschylus's original: "[i]t's like watching a big forest fire. Big, violent, and the sound not like anything else. Every character in Agamemnon sets fire to language in a different way" (3). Among them, Cassandra; and Carson's anxiousness to convey her gives rise to a paragraph brilliantly contrasting deep-seated needs of the poet-translator with the character's – and of course our own – relation to language:

> As a translator, I have spent years trying to grasp Kassandra in words. Long before I had any interest in the rest of *Agamemnon*, I found myself working and reworking the single scene in which she appears with her language that breaks open. I got some fine sentences out of it, and thought to publish them, but this seemed vain. I dreamed

> of her weirdly mixed with the winters of my childhood and imagined a play where someone like Björk would sing wild translingual songs while sailing down a snowy river of ancient Asia Minor. But other people have tried such things and anyway the play already exists. It is *Agamemnon*.
>
> (Carson, 4)

Image and meaning interlock in vivid ways here – and almost immediately, Francis Bacon's methods and vision are reached for by way of explaining both the ancient dramatist but also what Carson wishes to accomplish.

Bacon's presence, not least as a reader of Aeschylus himself (he is quoted here as having said that "[r]eading translations of Aeschylus … opens up the valves of sensation for me", 4) is already intimated from the ominous cover design. For Carson, the painter's work reconnects to the violence of reality, working upon sensation in its stated attempt to "return fact onto the nervous system" (5). The poet-translator proceeds to tell us that Aeschylus uses language the way Bacon uses paint, since the ancient dramatist's method was "to use the theater as a mind" composing scenes in which "[r]eal objects are so packed with meanings both literal and metaphoric that they explode into symbol" (ibid.). Such comments are not simply reflected in decisions made in the course of the translation – inevitably, they also form a nexus of suppositions that the knowing reader will carry into the relationship to be formed with the text.

Similar things happen in the texts prefacing the other two plays included. Arriving at *Elektra*, Carson rightly moves her attention – and ours – from the power of image, to involvements of sound and sense, to how language binds on the complexities of female identity. "She is a torrent of self", Carson readily confirms about the heroine; it is Electra's intense relationship with language and noise ("[she] talks, wails, argues, denounces, sings, chants and screams from one end of the play to the other", 79) that decides things for the translator: the "vocabulary of screams" proves so rich that Carson opts for transliterating them letter for letter ("OIMI!" instead of "Alas!" or "Woe is me!", ibid.). At the same time, the poet-translator draws attention to the shifts in tone traversing the deception/recognition scene with Orestes, not only because they pose difficulty, in a more technical sense, for the translation; but also because they implicitly comment on the boundaries between art and reality, as well as ones between narrative/scenes echoed and retold: at several points Sophocles appears to directly quote Aeschylus, with words spoken by Agamennon now issuing from the mouth of his daughter.

When we reach *Orestes* and Euripides' time, the self has turned further inward and action is more ambivalent. Carson's Introduction now locates modified boundaries between inner world and narrative, and comments on how those greater intricacies and significance of words, written and spoken, will pronounce elements of irony, (self-)subversion. More than before, lines between outside and inside, truth and falsehood, person and text, the serious and the comical, are blurred. Euripides composes this latter tragedy in ways that repeatedly create a "mad tension between content and form" (176). Here, it is contradictions in plot and style, incoherent and maniacal characters and Gods, inconsequential registers or commands that speak of a different kind of intention from this "most tragic" of the dramatists. The irrationality of the overall design, argues Carson, points to deeper, darker truths – "at the very bottom of its calculations, real depravity has no master plan of any kind" (178). It is such lucid insights, leading into and arriving from the translating act, that account for the overall quality of *An Oresteia*, affirming along the way criticism as part of the art of translation. This is a book that should be studied further, indeed taught in translation seminars. And not least because composing a worthy preface or afterword is most definitely among the abilities the literary translator should strive to possess. The note-perfect paratext is often a sign of a literary translation's true completion and part of the poetry.

Seeing how original poems connect to recontextualized or "embedded" translations originating from *Tristia*, the exile poetry Ovid composed in Tomis, Josephine Balmer's *The Word for Sorrow* (first published in 2009 and recently available in paperback), is a more adventurous affair. The progression towards this remarkable book appears in some respects to be natural.

Balmer, a classical translator with perceptive renditions of Sappho and other classical women poets under her belt during the nineties, first explored porous zones between translating and original poetry in *Chasing Catullus: Poems, Translations and Transgressions*, the companion to her *Catullus: Poems of Love and Hate.* Simultaneous publication of these books in 2004 already implies inspirations in translation, inceptions in parallel: the English versions in the latter volume coincide with an unflinching look at masculine worldviews inhabited by a Roman poet, while in *Chasing Catullus* an intricate narrative is threaded in addressing personal loss, with several instances of found poetry and translations or versions from classical poets juxtaposing with Balmer's own work. *The Word for Sorrow* explores this method more ambitiously, moving away from more recognizably autobiographical elements and towards wider scenes of humanity in a time of crisis. Here consciousness is exiled in war, suffering losses on all fronts: as Balmer herself admits, an inscription in a Latin dictionary initially used to translate Ovid's work leads both poet and reader to the testimonies of soldiers fighting the Gallipoli campaign. The process of translation turns to a meditation on conflict, with the dictionary itself then becoming a device bringing together past and present, and uniting very similar experiences across decades and millennia. The found stories and real or imagined voices of British soldiers in a foreign land crosscut with Ovid's sorrows and agonies, which become, in this manner, more tangible than ever:

> If on this page you detect some new hand, fresh script
> I have dictated, don't fret: for I am sick –
> sick, here at the end of the unknown world, half-dead
> (reports of recovery exaggerated).
> Here there's no rest-home, rations fit for invalid,
> no one with physician's skill in pain relief;
> no one to comfort, wile away convalescence
> with tall tales, no friend to sit in attendance.
> Stranded far away, thoughts of home creep up in vain
> But most of you, dear wife, so I mouth your name,
> whisper at shades, sigh at shadows: they take your shape.
> […]
>
> (Balmer, "Naso Writes his Own Epitaph", 20, lines 1-11)

– says the Roman poet, but he is not quite alone in feeling intense pain; his own words are preceded by ones attributed to the owner of the dictionary (re-named here "Geoffrey") that Balmer uses to translate Ovid:

> Those of us who came back no longer walked
> with the living. We had felt Hades' breath,
> our hair turned grey in that sharp blast of frost.
> The Turks could drop their bleak propaganda –
> "today the flies, tomorrow the vultures" –
> now we weren't men but novice corpses.
>
> (Balmer, "Knocking at the Door", 19, lines 19-24)

The Word for Sorrow is thus made: a wide range of textualities alternate, inflect or appropriate one another. We come across diaries, eyewitness accounts and historical sources, versioned Ovid and original poetry which nearly always has stories to tell – as the three parts of the book ("The Journey Out", "Landed", "The Way Home") track situations and persons, Ovid and the soldiers (and the poet herself) across time-frames and place-names. The question remains here: how far from translation do we find ourselves? Some of Ovid's poems and lines may be accurately enacted but as Balmer's own notes clearly indicate, far more cases are "based on" or "edited

from" *Tristia* – because Balmer actually intends these translations to resemble detailed sketches, the "almost final" drafts from a translator's notebook (see her Preface, xvi). The intention is not to convey Ovid "appropriately" but show *engagement with him*, alongside empathy overall with acts of self-expression in the face of traumatic experience. Of course, someone who wants to read Ovid's isolated voice, *Tristia* by itself, will need to look elsewhere. *The Word for Sorrow* offers a new whole; within this truly original composition, we find Ovid *in part*, resounded from a poet who does not cease to be a masterful translator of classical literature. Balmer's project very much includes the aim to enliven the ancient text also, to appreciate and *feel* it anew. That these translations weave with documents from the Great War and recognitions set in the present allows for more nuance and depth in our relationship with Ovid's ancient poems. At the same time, it is this conscious deployment and "creative exercising" of translation that confirms it as an essential aspect of literature and appears to locate living tissue in the writings of the past. The hybrid nature of *The Word for Sorrow*, above all, seems to parallel the scaffoldings inside, as well as many of the associations made in, the creative mind. What is more, the classicist does not really go away; it is an identity informed by new insights gained in acts of poetry, just as the poetry is also indebted to understandings allowed by scholarly work. Balmer's recent monograph, titled *Piecing Together the Fragments: Translating Classical Verse, Creating Contemporary Poetry (2013)* certainly benefits from this dialogue as it proceeds to survey those rewarding encounters between classical texts and literary creation, across time. Impeccably researched, the book includes various stops at Balmer's own work and method.

Another side road to ancient source material is presented by Alice Oswald. In fact, her *Memorial* reminds us of the sense in which the essential nature, the core value of an epic like the *Iliad* will survive and persist in its revoicings in other languages and across time. The modern poet understands – and in this she's not the first – that plot and narrative are of little importance when it comes to the events at Troy: like Christopher Logue (whose *War Music* at points casts a shadow in terms of imagery and verbal urgency) and like other poets and translators before, Oswald confirms the drawing power of the *Iliad* in the realization and rendering of force. Here, violence is all; story and meaning happen afterwards. The telling, in the original as well, is primarily focused on this oft-quoted *enargeia*: on the realness of impacting bodies and the inescapable, unforgiving metal of weapons and armour. These are described in extreme and bright detail, alongside brief glimpses of home and basic biographies of warriors which are earned at death's door, exactly when their story in Oswald's phrase, "finishes here in darkness" (20). The other crucial element is of course, the oral tradition and influence from Greek lament poetry. Oswald's allegiance, admitted clearly in her introductory note is, again, not to the "printed" *Iliad* but to the vital instability and energies of memorable speech. Because Homer inhabits a preliterate culture – a fact also echoed by Eavan Boland in her Afterword to the American edition:

> For the reader of a later age, living in an era of fixed text, there is something bright and moving in this image of the *Iliad* as a river, not an inland sea, flowing in and out of song, performance, memory, elegy and human interaction.
>
> (Boland, in Oswald 89)

It is perhaps in revealing this that *Memorial* can be claimed to be a valid image of translation also, a carrying over and across of the method of collaborative composition – as well as aspiring to, and designing, an analogous reception. In the course of this attempted repeating of the epic (where in Oswald's own words it is emphatically the "atmosphere" that is translated), *Memorial* inevitably becomes an *intensification* of the *Iliad*. The new poem starts as an image of its title, an 8-page long list of capitalized names. Then these names become surrounded by a simple structure of stanza and twice-told simile. It is a remarkably effective "tagging" of lives and selves, barely glimpsed before they are gruesomely lost. Lines like the following testify to Oswald's ability in echoing and re-imagining the vigor, the present-ness of the original in which violent death is everywhere, happening to nearly everyone already:

[…]
OENOMAUS
HELENUS
ORESBIUS
PERIPHAS
And

ACAMAS a massive man best fighter in Thrace
Came over the choppy tides of the Hellespont
And almost instantly took a blow on his helmet
The spear pressed through to his skull
Tipped with darkness
It was Ajax who stopped him

Like that slow-motion moment
When a woman weighs the wool
Her poor old spider hands
Work all night spinning a living for her children
And then she stops
She soothes the scales to a standstill

(Oswald 21-22)

Proceeding this way, *Memorial* encounters and collects human consciousness well inside the battlefield; the purpose of this minimal yet poignant patterning seems to lie before explanation begins with narrative, before dramatic structure and literary intent. In this sense also, it is no accident that Oswald subtitles her work "an excavation" (which, interestingly, reverts to the simpler "a version of Homer's *Iliad*" in the American edition). At the same time, it is perhaps why many of these similes appear to stride a line between capable visual metaphor and the near-meaningless. Their repetition amplifies, simultaneously, both futility and brutal force. The tonal effect is remarkable in how it conveys to readers and listeners the sense that "the ruin and music of war are sensory, not logical" (87), as Boland puts it towards the end of her Afterword. It is in this awareness that original, translation and poetry meet. And further, in realizing that literature's very origins lie in acts of remembrance: so now, and in this way, ancient soldiers and their lives find their way to us, their names more real because the *Iliad* cannot be just literature – and because this new restatement is crucially directed also by empathy. Even as Oswald maintains that her aim in *Memorial* was "translucence rather than translation", it is the latter word that we reach for in accounting for this empathy, and for the identifications occurring. Meanwhile, the poetry in this book is arrived at as we share and receive these lives; uncertain why, *and when* they were lost.

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