

Your Catullus, Her Catullus

Catullus, *Poems of Love and Hate*, translated by Josephine Balmer.
Bloodaxe, £8.95 (pbk)

Josephine Balmer, *Chasing Catullus: Poems, Translations and Transgressions* Bloodaxe, £7.95 (pbk)

One thing that Yeats had right in “The Scholars” was the sheer avidity of the Catullan reader; every Catullan clings to their Catullus like Daddy Bear covets his porridge. Why anyone wants to translate Catullus is a mystery, therefore, when nothing but plaintiffs are waiting to cry foul. How do you do justice to the responsibilities of Catullan scholarship and the poet’s own peculiarly ludic learning, whilst still giving us “dirty Catullus”, the popular bawd? This has led translators into strange places, notably Peter Whigham, whose struggles to do justice to Catullus’s priapic inventions led him into translating the name of Catullus’s adversary *mentula* (“the prick”) as “O’Toole”. Let’s hope that there is a German version with *Herr Schwanzschmidt*.

A big part of the problem with Catullus is with Latin itself. His poems exemplify the poetically concentrative powers of the language, where lyric force conspires harmoniously with allusion. With every word a vortex, to even hint at the suggestibility of a Catullan poem, the translator into English needs too many other words. And so the venerable scholarly translations tend towards phrases far longer than hendecasyllables, and the result is a fascinating type of poem, albeit something closer to the Japanese *Haibun* than a Veronan love elegy. Alternatively, a translation that aspires to “capture” the punctuating force of Catullus’s singular tone tends to lose a lot of nuance; this is how we end up with Catullus as a proto-Rochester, an ingenious “fuck-poet” before anything else.

Sometimes, the complexity of a single word has confounded all who have presumed to translate it, most notoriously with the

word *otium* in Carmen 51b, the text that might be a fragment or a coda to his translation of Sappho 31, the poem quoted by Longinus in *On the Sublime*. *Otium* (according to the *OED*, “the aristocratic mode of leisure. Thinking”) cannot be rendered exactly with one English word, particularly as it carries powerfully oppositional connotations. It is the opposite of *negotium* (business, honest toiling), and carries a peculiar admonitory moral force, so to give it as “idleness” (Goold), “sloth” (Whigham), “soft life” (Sesar), “ease” (Gladstone), “ease and idleness” (Symons), “easy” (the daft Hugh Tollhurst), or “languid madness” (Gregory) is not altogether satisfactory. In her recent translations of Catullus’s shorter poems (the long poems are to be published in a separate translation) Josephine Balmer goes for “leisure”. Accurate but poetically unexciting, this term has at least the purpose of directing you back to the expectorating sibilants of the original:

OTIUM, Catulle, tibi molestum est:
otio exsultas nimiumque gestis:
otium et reges prius et beatas
perdidit urbes.

Sometimes the translator cannot compete, and should just give up, and Balmer loses no respect for making such a concession. Elsewhere, she relishes the odd immersion in Catourette’s Syndrome, and comes up with resourcefully scabrous vocabularies, as with her version of Carmen 97, titled “Æmilius’ Mouth and Arse”:

... on balance, yes, the arse is less obscene
since it lacks teeth. His mouth’s sesquipedal,
poking out of gapped gums, spokes on rotted wheel,
besides, it grins like a cunt, split, fissured
like a mule pissing at the height of summer.
still he fucks them all, seems irresistible
(for which he should do donkey-work on treadmill).
As for the women, let’s try to define them:
they would lick the arse of diarrhoeal hangmen.

There is a relish here for the rough stuff, sure, but Balmer is also excited by the metrical challenge that Catullus can present, and

she finds pragmatic and imaginative solutions at times to the various conundrums he offers, notably in “A Wild Woman: an acrostic”, a poem where the first and last letters of the Latin lines spell out, *natu ceu æs* “by birth [as hard] as bronze”. Wit takes Balmer a long way in her work, and even the inspired cover illustration contains its own gag: an erotic scene from a first-century B.C. Roman fresco, on close inspection it shows a priapically-challenged male being got-up by his mistress. This archly-chosen detail signals the tenor of Balmer’s approach, and also serves to remind us that for all his perceived braggadocio, Catullus’s view of male sexuality is often a withering one.

But this is Catullus, and so I have to complain somehow. Her decision to group the poems thematically seems arbitrary and not convincing, if not fatally damaging. Whatever about changing the order of the sequence of the Verona MS (although Balmer’s last poem is also Catullus’s last Carmen) a bigger worry would be the decision to detach the longer poems for incorporation into a follow-up volume. The combination of major and minor modes is an important Catullan signature, in my opinion. However, not incorporating the Latin texts into the edition is a good idea, an apt disinclination to those who would have their Catullus explicated rather than enjoyed.

Balmer’s *Catullus* has been published simultaneously with *Chasing Catullus: Poems, Translations and Transgressions*, a sequence made up of original poems, found poetry and adaptations (some more free than others) of classical poets other than Catullus, with some Cavafy thrown in. So this is an anthology, but not for the classroom; the texts are deployed to describe a peculiarly personal trajectory through loss. Balmer appropriates the classical poetry of the underworld to attempt to come to the terms with the death of her seven-year-old niece from liver cancer. In doing so, she describes her poems as “transgressions... versions which shamelessly subvert a source text’s original intent or meaning”; she amplifies originals, reworks Plato’s *Republic*, amounting an assemblage that makes her loss canonical in itself, to strangely convert private grief into something universal.

The edge to Balmer’s work comes from the Marvellian subtleties of her handling of the elegiac mode, because even when *Chasing Catullus* is sometimes unbearably poignant, it is also never less than strange, and the stealing of the voices and texts of others gives it the quality of a harlequinade as much as a lament. The title

of the book seems misleading at first, as there are no versions of Catullus in this volume, but its significance becomes singularly clear as the temper of Balmer's elegy grows in complexity and ferocity. Catullus elegises his brother first, lost love second, but then everything; one loss becomes a metonym for loss as the predominant condition of the world. Catullus loses Rome, Balmer loses her niece and England, as the book dissolves into a vision of a Homeric homecoming to the infernal, the ephemeral, and the terminal:

Up the lane the wheelie bins stand sentinel, stiff,
guarding drives from insomniac scavenger thieves;
down the Gardens, the blossom's resolutely blown,
squandering its span to the moon's cheap trick of light,
as all the lawns now, even ours, seem freshly mown
and all the let-down petals cooling cinder, bonfire ash.

So for all the protestations of "shameless subversion", there actually turns out to be a lot of decorum in these poems, and such sensationalistic professions of transgression are misleading. Balmer's work is at its best when it sheds such put-on radical self-consciousness, and the dignified rage of her loss speaks for itself. Even if some of its discrete poems do not always convince, as an affective whole this book has a power surpassing the thorough heartbreak of Dunn's *Elegies*, and does not just avoid sentimentality, but positively refuses it.