Creative Classical Translation

1 By Way of the Classics
Entanglements of Theory and Practice

This Element surveys ways in which the literatures of ancient Greece and Rome have stayed with us over the centuries in rich dialogue with subsequent writing. A convincing case for the centrality of translation in (re)making literature in the anglophone world is made by Gillespie (2011: 13), who draws our attention to periods that proved particularly significant – the eighteenth century, for example, a ‘translating culture, with the greatest prestige attaching to classical translation’. Ongoing interest in studying the intersections of (literary) history, evolving notions about creativity, and cultural self-image is evidenced in our examinations of crucial figures such as Hölderlin in the annals of translation. Hardwick (2003) has done foundational work on a veritable flock of terms – for example, acculturation, analogue, refiguration, appropriation, and intervention – that problematize our perspective on translational dialogues. But classical originals themselves present issues; having been ‘endlessly reshaped through transcriptions, copies, editions, commentaries and translations, they have been reconfigured through generations of different aesthetic and ideological criteria’ to the point where it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine what an original might be’ (Bassnett 2022: 240; my emphasis). Variations, cultural transfer, and intertextuality already operate in antiquity: forking off from Homeric material, the Aeneid represented both a literary evolution of the epic tradition and an attempt at a native, founding myth. Towards the present, literary movements imply concerted action, and The Classics in Modernist Translation (Kozak and Hickman 2019) is one of numerous edited volumes attending to how aspects of the classical tradition may be redeployed in validating incipient ideas about literature. Modernists like Eliot and Pound embed stretches of ancient Greek or Latin text in their poetry, and phrasings from The Cantos often return to pollinate Pound’s translations from Sophocles or Euripides (see Liebregts 2019); the adjectival designation of ‘creative’ before the word ‘translation’ registers at least as early as the review essay ‘Creative Translation: Ezra Pound’s Women of Trachis’ (Mason 1969).

An essential difficulty in locating cut-off points between translation, imitation, and more transgressive practices may actually bring together theoretical frames and methodologies; Prins (2016: 13–40) explains the necessity of a historical poetics as one that ‘cannot separate the practice of reading a poem from the histories and theories of reading that mediate our ideas about poetry’ (p. 14), illustrating this through two classically inflected poems: in Robert Browning’s ‘Pan and Luna’ (1880), we see ‘historical poetics at work inside Browning’s poem, which highlights its own mediation through the
transmission, translation, transformation, and reinterpretation of Virgil’s lines that compose the legend of Pan and Luna, now recomposed by Browning’ (Prins 2016: 21), while in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s ‘A Musical Instrument’ (1860), Pan turns into a ‘questionable figure in an antipastoral poem that interrogates the limit of pastoral conventions’ (Prins 2016: 25). We often read ancient texts through the literary productions and artists of the present, relations with which are mutually creative, as Martindale (1993) has argued. Classical scholars themselves compared iterations of ancient plays well before Brower (1947: 383) stated that ‘t[ranslations forcibly remind us of the obvious fact that when we read, we read from a particular point in space and time’.

There have been aeons-long entanglements of theoretical reflection with translating texts from the classical world – as in d’Ablancourt’s prefaces to the French translations of Tacitus (1640) and Lucian (1654) or von Humboldt’s introduction to his 1816 translation of Agamemnon – too often involving a spirited defence of strategies adopted or a painful record of compromises that could not be escaped. It is in a preface to a translation of Ovid’s Epistles (1680; in Schulte and Biguenet 1992: 17–31) that John Dryden illustrates – also through examples of earlier renderings of Virgil and Horace – a tripartite division of metaphrase (‘word by word, and line by line’, p. 17), paraphrase (‘translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense’, p. 17), and, finally, imitation (‘where the translator (if now he has not lost that name) assumes the liberty not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion’, p. 17). Nearer the present, translation theorists build on these foundations, codifying and detailing choices that may be facing all translators: when Lefevere and Bassnett (1998) chart three distinct approaches to translation, we encounter two very old names in a ‘Horatian model’, which trusts the target audience and largely bases decisions on its needs, and a ‘Jerome model’, in which favouring the source is paramount, before, finally, the ‘Schleiermacher model’ is listed, where the strangeness and difference of the source are preserved for the target audience.

The academic study of translation routinely draws material from classical (re)translation. Lefevere (1975) outlines a range of approaches, from metrical to homophonic translation, through English renderings of Catullus’ poem 64 that appeared in the course of a century. Scott (2010: 109) produces self-conscious ‘scanned readings’ of a number of prose and verse translations of the Aeneid to discuss ‘the ways in which literary translation is a translation into the literary’ (emphasis in original). Contemporary translation studies returns to further integrate tenets developed in previous decades within a richly interconnected
terrain, for instance in Asimakoulas (2019), which combines Lefevere’s perspectives on rewriting with aspects of narratology, humour, and reception studies to apprehend a spectrum of actions in rendering Aristophanes, inter- and intra-lingually, for the page or stage or in multimodal reimaginings and adaptations for children.

Re-creative shapes of classical literature may in part be determined by incursions of theory: from post-structuralist challenges to authorship to debates on gender or postcolonial writing. Transcultural strands within gender studies often draw upon translation, with various assertions on the fluidity of sexual identity preoccupied with the influence of language and its power to impose a society’s notions on gendered behaviour. Along with a range of interventionist textual practices, translation is seen as challenging binaries, rethought as a subversive force in the work of Levine (e.g., Levine 1984) or von Flotow (e.g., von Flotow 1997). However, Reynolds (2011: 9) warns that we may arrive at senses of translation that exhibit a ‘metaphorical drift’ in conveying ‘an awareness that culture is text and that identity is constructed through language; but they tend not, any more than their nineteenth-century precursors, to hold strictly to the model of translation-between-languages. The word “translate” sometimes means “express again in different words” – and sometimes just “express”.

Post-structuralist theory resonates in studies like Ioannidou (2017) in which humanist and postmodernist strands of engaging ancient tragedy are contrasted, as the author contemplates how rewritings and distinctly metatheatrical adaptations challenge the canon and hierarchies. Such work may highlight questionable morals in the originals and possibly help reclaim tragedy for minority and oppressed groups. Ioannidou pays particular attention to the role of hybrid versions in questioning the boundaries between translation and adaptation, seen as frequently interlacing activities (see especially Ioannidou 2017: chap. 4); she terms ‘Dionysiac translation’ as one that is resistant to clear-cut distinctions and describes versions of tragedy that, in their treatment of plot, themes, and imagery, ‘use their prototypes as fragments of antiquity that can be conceived only in the process of perpetual metamorphosis’ (Ioannidou 2017: 128).

But even as theoretical approaches appear productively attuned to practices of classical translation, poets themselves often drive understandings of the art and greatly influence reception dynamics. Stephen Harrison (2009: 15) notes that contemporary poets turn to ancient material not so much in a spirit of homage as in a spirit of appropriation. The modern ‘deconsecration’ of great poetic figures such as Homer and Virgil, in the sense of removing their cultural centrality as canonical and immutable texts generally known and read in their original languages, allows contemporary poets such as Derek Walcott or Seamus Heaney to create new classic works using
classical material and a sophisticated intertextual approach, just as Virgil and Horace created great Latin works through the substantial and subtle reuse of Greek models in a Roman context. Poets can now safely appropriate what they need for their own work and their own contemporary concerns.

Predicaments of reading and reception are poignantly reflected in the poem ‘Camilla of the Volscians’ by John Matthias (2016: 52–6). After he indicates ‘from Aeneid, VII’, over the poem’s five pages readers are led into stretches combining critical commentary and (auto)biographical territory. The second section, for instance, begins with the poet recovering a wealth of connections:

Camilla, blood-sister fore-type of the Roman-slaying
Boadicea, enters Virgil’s Latin hand Englished
by the generations – Douglas, Surrey, Raleigh,
Dryden, and the rest . . .

she glows
in language, glows as language, bronzed and ready
for her book, heard by all of them as death-dealer in her
death-throes all the way to the American Fitzgerald,
finished with his Iliad, done with his Odyssey, reading from
a manuscript, not yet published, to a few of us, friends
of his friend Sandeen, at Notre Dame, and well before the
excerpts in Conjunctions, Kenyon, Poetry,
circa 1981–1983 –

‘For Penny,’ read the dedication. Penelope, who else?

That was in another age. And when I taught my seminar
a student even in those days complained: ‘What does Virgil
have to do with our topic, “The Generation of Robert Lowell?”’
And I said: ‘Think about it,’ but I don’t know that he did.

(pp. 52–3, lines 24–41)

Yet the starting point for the poem is an actual translation from the Aeneid, occurring in a first section of twenty-three lines. Such extraction from the original, and resituating it as a preamble to Matthias’ meditation on his colleagues and himself living with the classics, suggests some of the hybrid textual formations that will occupy us throughout this Element. But how can we conceive of this wide array of intertextual relationships, from allusions to rewriting to creative translation, sometimes cohabiting the same page? Hardwick (2011) addresses the question of gradations of classically inspired work and identifies what she calls ‘fuzzy connections’. Examining a number of classical transusions in the poetic work of Patrick Kavanagh, she turns to the palimpsests that emerge as these are subsequently internalized and alluded to by
the later Irish poets Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley. The features of these ‘fuzzy connections’ can be diverse, but they create ‘for the reader a simultaneity of experience that brings together the ancient and the new. The ancient image or referent can actually be made into a connector, even if the reader does not have detailed knowledge of its associations’ (Hardwick 2011: 56). And she especially considers the effect of translation techniques in several of Longley’s poems as incorporating ‘the imagist and local/global connections that Kavanagh had made part of the classical poetic tradition in Ireland but ... also fulfill[ing] an integrative function allowing the reader to hear the ancient text without previous knowledge of it. Thus allusion, intertextuality and poetic memory coalesce through the activating force of translation’ (p. 57).

Several other reasons may present themselves: research on (self-)censorship and its motives when it comes to the classics shows creative ideas coalescing with manifestations of bowdlerization or various expurgations in sanitizing texts to correspond with prevalent mores. O’Sullivan (2009: 76–92) further points out, through examples of translations of Martial and Apuleius, precisely that ‘difficulty of differentiation between censorship and naturalization of the classics – a difficulty which is reflected in the contradictions we have seen between the practice and the discourse of a number of their translators’ (p. 92).

So literary-creative modulations as well as theoretical stances emerge from attempts to decipher and redesignate classical texts. This Element surveys a transdisciplinary area witnessing manifold penetrations of ancient material into contemporary consciousness and culture. It adopts different vantage points and concentrations: from a case study of Homer translated and reworked, showing epic verse diversifying and rearranged as we reach towards the present; to idiosyncrasies, tactics, or modes relating to sociocultural environs such as those observed in the United States in recent decades; and to reasons for retranslation and paratextual support. Placing the adjective ‘creative’ before ‘classical translation’ reflects the often-sizeable adjustments made by the translator in transmitting an ancient text that might still speak to us. But the Element also anticipates tensions and contradictions of a translating act often at its limits, reflecting on itself as we engage with the literary art of the classical past.

Strains, Sites, Shades, and Settings

Particular authors or works, and even characters from classical antiquity that emblematize human behaviour, may rouse modes of translational creativity. These are not merely cultural shorthands achieved through calling upon episodes, or figures from, say, the Metamorphoses, or one’s stance on sexuality, amplified through referencing Sappho; rather, they may exist as loci pairing up with more concerted, re-creative dispositions.
Pope and Dryden were among the early imitators of Horace’s epistles; and revisitings of Horace may also attach to commemorative acts, as when Heaney revoices Ode 1.34 in the wake of 9/11 (see Section 3). With Stuart Gillespie, we discover a selection of translations made by the sixteenth-century poet John Polwhele during the English civil wars and their aftermath that sees ‘several of these Horatian poems [used] as vehicles for reflection on the events of [Polwhele’s] time’ (Gillespie 2021: 54), with yet others clearly signposting Polwhele’s relationship, as an artist, to Ben Jonson. Moul (2010) proposes that Polwhele’s Horatianism itself is ‘Jonsonian’ – evidencing ‘a habit of Horatian imitation associated with Jonson and his circle’ (Moul 2010: 198, cited in Gillespie 2021: 55). A more recent example is Maureen Almond’s seventeen recontextualizations of the *Epodes*, integrated into her 2004 collection *The Works* and helping to tell the story of a Teesside working-class community around the end of the Second World War. Almond repeatedly cites *Ars Poetica* in an essay reflecting on her process, and her concluding paragraph reads:

I hope readers will not see my versions of these Horace *Epodes* as a painting in which the ‘painter chose to join a human head to the neck of a horse’ (*Ars Poetica* 1–2) but as a work both ‘simple and uniform’ (*Ars Poetica* 23). So why did I not simply write this collection without any reference to Horace? The answer is that reading Horace helps me to see more clearly those traits which continue to attach to mankind. By recognizing Horace’s characters I can more easily understand characters in my own contemporary world, but I believe, too, that this is a two-way flow: ‘every interpretation teaches us something more about the content of the interpreted expression.’ (Almond 2009: 41; quotes Eco 2004: 12)

Sappho’s verse epitomizes the often incomplete state of ancient texts or supports contemplations of sexual identity – in particular, lesbianism. duBois (2015) has delved into ensuing dilemmas for translation, and especially how these may correlate with queer perspectives, dialogues of textual practice, and literary or cultural theory. Similarly, Mueller (2021: 36–52) considers how modern theorists of sexuality categorize the poet from Lesbos. Rayor (1990, 2016) has trained our perspective on the competing inclinations facing the translator of Sappho: from compulsive philological devotion to the remaining text to absences stimulating intervention, a completion via imagined additions. This is poignantly conveyed in Davenport’s introduction to *7 Greeks* (1995), which is found to double as a space hosting a translation *that could have been*. We witness, as he engages Sappho, tensions between what is allowed, or the translator’s self-regulation, and a finished poem illuminating senses present in the original fragments:

My intention everywhere has been to suggest the tone of Sappho’s words. Had I not accepted as an outer limit to transposing meaning from Greek to
English the rule that one must not tamper with grammatical integrity, I could justify, utterly beyond the pale of scholarship, taking the half-visible imagery of Fragment 119, for example, and, using the multiple possibilities for what the torn words might have been in their wholeness, making such a poem as:

In yellow frock and yellow shawl,
Stole of topaz and peach-flower hat
Knit in your hair like a ring of stars,
In crocus sash and mulberry vest,
Sandals red as amber wine,
You stand in the orchard as
Delicate as the flowering trees.

(Davenport 1995: 13–14)

He is quick to add that this is ‘assuredly not Sappho nor accepted mode of translation’ but very likely remains ‘an example of her imagery’ (p. 14). The list of possible dispositions should include Anne Carson’s *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (2003), where in attempting to mirror the actuality of lost text, translation becomes more self-conscious. Carson entertains a radical absence for the translator, in moves that may better reveal the state of the original:

In translating I tried to put down all that can be read of each poem in the plainest language I could and, using where possible the same order of words and thoughts as Sappho did. I like to think that, the more I stand out of the way, the more Sappho shows through. This is an amiable fantasy (transparency of self) within which most translators labor. (Carson 2003: x)

An anthology such as *Sappho through English Poetry* (Jay and Lewis 1996), however, offers a panorama of the creativity instigated across half a millennium, as it tracks literary negotiations of Sappho’s style. The editors vividly compartmentalize available material. ‘Versions: Translations and Imitations’ are followed by ‘Representations: Myths, Meditations and Travesties’. I have suggested that, as fellow poets absorb the output of a classical voice like Sappho’s in their present, ‘any intended work of salvage might very soon approximate tribute, re-imagining or recontextualizing’ (Nikolaou 2019: 1). Results of such work therefore can be defined by hybridity or shaded decisively by publication context – or both, as in Lowell’s *Imitations* (1961), in which he isolates Sappho’s ‘Three Letters to Anaktoria’ (Lowell 1990: 3–5). If discrepancies in length – the first two poem-letters take up nearly a page each, while a third features only four lines – do not readily suggest what is taking place, Lowell admits in the introduction that ‘My first two Sappho poems are really new poems based on hers’ (p. xii).
Talbot (2004: 139–69) deems that earlier English literature was less receptive to Callimachus’ significance. He deserved more but is already ‘ancient history for Propertius and hence doubly-removed from Pound and us’ (p. 139) when those ‘Shades of Callimachus’ are besought in the very first line of *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (Pound 1919). And yet the adjective ‘Callimachean’ is arguably just as useful as ‘Horatian’ or ‘Pindaric’ to describe literary practices of modernity and, as Talbot’s examples illustrate, ‘T. S. Eliot’s hyper-consciousness of literary tradition, or the combination of technical fastidiousness and sensuous erudition in Geoffrey Hill’ (Talbot 2004: 140). On these grounds, we are directed to the 1998 translation by Lombardo and Rayor: ‘the first English Callimachus to stake itself on drawing out the poet’s characteristic self-consciousness’ (Talbot 2004: 151) through the word choices and even typographical arrangements the translators employ. Talbot demonstrates the concern shared between Callimachus and modernism to ‘make it new’ through a translating that seems to position itself ‘in a line of kinships that neatly comes back round to the poet himself: Lombardo and Rayor doing homage to Pound doing homage to Propertius doing homage to Callimachus. The interrelationships embody the notion of continuous contemporaneity’ (p. 153). An even more crucial inference here is that *both* translations that Talbot discusses, the one by Lombardo and Rayor and the more recent one by Nisetich in 2001, are essentially needed to ‘break the ground’ because ‘Nisetich gives a clear translation, presentation, and scholarly apparatus; Lombardo and Rayor show how Callimachus can conduce to English poetry’ (p. 167). ‘What is needed now’, argues Talbot, ‘is for some resourceful poet to make use of these advances, and to reinvent Callimachus in English *in some way that goes beyond translation*’ (p. 167; my emphasis). Talbot’s review dates from 2004; Section 4 includes discussion of a publication by Stephanie Burt (2020) that is very similar to the likes that Talbot anticipates here. We may perhaps take notice, through the work of Burt and the earlier-mentioned Lombardo and Rayor (1998), of a ‘Callimachean strain’ in those more self-conscious, creative practices of literary translation.

The response to Ovid is traversed with interpretive, re-creative practices: especially through the *Metamorphoses*, artists across the centuries have intuited an essential meditation on the mutability and illusions that define human life. This epic played a ‘major role in the reception of classical poetry in the years from Dante to Milton. First, the process by which classical models are adapted and re-thought in the Renaissance is itself a form of metamorphosis, and Ovid frequently foreshadows this re-use of his work by combining radical change of shape with continuity of certain characteristics’ (Mack and North 2015: viii). Shakespeare’s Ovidianism is well-documented, and the sway of Ovid in the imagination of later authors has been charted in Warner (2004), while Cox