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Translation-Poems:
Blurred Genres and Shifting Authorship
in Contemporary English Verse

Abstract: One of the most interesting tendencies in contemporary English poetry which arguably will develop further and mark the next decades of writing in England, are works which I would call translation-poems, i.e. texts which problematize the distinction between translations and original works, as well as between authors and translators. One could mention here such books as Jo Shapcott's *Tender Taxes* (versions of Rilke's poems), Alice Oswald's *Memorial* (a translation of Homer's *The Iliad*), and Lavinia Greenlaw's *A Double Sorrow: Troilus and Criseyde* (a version of Chaucer's poem). All three books have been advertised as authored by these English poets; it is only their names that appear on book covers. Significantly, this type of translating, or adapting poetry comes now largely from women writers. Trying to define the blurred genre they are working in, they call it variously: versions, excavations, extrapolations, remixes, etc.

Keywords: literary translation, adaptation, authorship, appropriation, women poets, contemporary English poetry, Lavinia Greenlaw, Alice Oswald, Jo Shapcott

1. Introduction: Authors, Poets, and Translators

The last two or three decades have been marked by the growing awareness of the importance and specificity of translation. Centres of translation studies have been cropping up, translation workshops have become part and parcel of university programmes. Translators have stopped being anonymous; they are often active actors of the literary scene, guests of literary events, even media celebrities, with their names appearing more and more regularly on book covers next to the names of 'original' authors. This process, from the translator's relative invisibility to his or her coming-out, found its exposition in Lawrence Venuti's landmark study

(1995), in which the scholar critically scrutinized the political and cultural basis of the assumption that a properly translated text should have an appearance that "it is not in fact a translation, but the 'original'" (1). The present-day process of translators' becoming visible is not so much a question of the long awaited sign of recognition of their work, though numerous examples can be given of books in which the translator's name was not revealed, and if it was, then only on the copyright page. Translators' work has long been seen as secondary, inferior, derivative (Simon 26, 29). The change of attitude came with the recognition that literary translation is a creative process, requiring not a 'transfer' of a source text into the target language culture, nor even its 'reproduction,' but a special kind of 'creation.' And if it is agreed that translating literature is, by definition, a creative intervention, then translators can be seen, to use Anna Legeżyńska's phrase, as "second authors" (20), or even as 'authors' of their target texts.

The degree of the translators' creativity depends on the type of the source text and its literary quality, reaching its height in translating poetry or poetically charged prose. It is thus no coincidence that translators of poetry are often poets in their own right: to render a poetic text into one's own language requires linguistic skills no less than writing one's own verse. Though there are translators of poetry who are not practicing poets, one could hardly find a poet now who has not doubled as a translator. This stands in sharp contrast to the situation with fiction writers: novelists are rarely involved in translations. Modern poets of the English language who produced, however occasionally, literary translations include T.S. Eliot translating Saint-John Perse, Ezra Pound translating Sextus Propertius, Robert Lowell translating Boris Pasternak, Louis Zukofsky translating (homophonically) Catullus, John Ashbery translating Rimbaud, Ted Hughes translating Janos Pilinszky, Seamus Heaney translating *Beowulf*. The list can be continued. What is interesting in these endeavours is the literary affinity between the poetry in translation and the poet-cum-translator's own poetic preoccupations. The poets' translations can be seen as extensions of their own poems, to the degree that it is often difficult to differentiate between the two, Pound's translations being the most evident example. His renderings of Chinese poems contributed to the emergence of his own style and today are included in Pound's poetry collections as his 'original' poems.

One could claim that due to these processes, with translators being recognized as (second) authors, translation becomes more of an autonomous literary genre, which is indicated by two parallel tendencies. Firstly, the target text's connection with the 'original' author is weakened, if not suspended. Secondly, the target text's ties with the translator are foregrounded, placing translations made by poets, such as Pound, within the context of their own poetry. At the risk of sounding banal, one can say that poetry translation requires much more linguistic creativity than any other type of literature. It also requires and allows for much more freedom, in the effect of which the translation may vary from word-to-word translation to free adaptation, bearing the characteristics of the translator's style and predilections.

Any critical study of the work of Hughes or Heaney will have to take into account their translations as works central to the evaluation of the poet's oeuvre. These processes result in the problematization of the term 'translation,' which is often made to include such translative interventions as adaptation or paraphrasis.

Robert Lowell's collection *Imitations* (1961) includes poems originally composed in such diverse languages as Greek (Homer), German (Heine), French (Baudelaire, Rimbaud), Italian (Ungaretti, Montale), and Russian (Annensky, Pasternak). In the publisher's note one can read that these are "original poems in English [created] from poems in another language" (n.p.). Poems in our language created from poems in another language would usually be called translations; it is strange then that the publisher avoided the term. In his Introduction to *Imitations* Lowell himself also tries to steer away from the word 'translation' and when the term actually appears, Lowell admits that he prefers to replace it with "an imitation":

> It seems self-evident that no professor or amateur poet, or even good poet writing hastily, can by miracle transform himself into a fine metricist. I believe that poetic translation – I would call it an imitation – must be expert and inspired, and needs at least as much technique, luck and rightness of hand as an original poem. (xii)

This statement finds its supplement at the end of the Introduction, where Lowell declares: "I have been almost as free as the authors themselves in finding ways to make them ring right for me" (xiii). Lowell's words deserve a closer look: the poet feels uneasy about using the word "translation," coining instead the more general term "imitation," which allows him much greater freedom, almost as great as the author's. He is ready to claim that translation does not only require the same skill, but may involve an even greater command of technique than the original poem. Translating poetry, as opposed to Robert Frost's famous dictum, is to Lowell not a matter of losing, but of creating. Lowell does not go further in his revision of translation, but the logical consequence of his line of thinking would be to claim that someone who has to demonstrate "at least as much technique, luck and rightness of hand" as an original poet, i.e. the translator, has to be a poet himself. We arrive again at the question from the beginning of the article: can we think of the translator as the author?

I take Lowell's work, and especially his introductory remarks, as a symbolic beginning of what I would call the modern era of translation poems. Forty years later an Irish poet, Tom Paulin, published *The Road to Inver* (2004), bringing together verse translation which had previously appeared in his poetry books and offering us, as the publisher's note declares, "the richest collection of its kind since Robert Lowell's *Imitations*" (n.p.) – with versions of Rilke, Baudelaire, Ponge, Montale, Mayakovsky, Akhmatova, Tsvetayeva, Horace, Sophocles, and many others. The publisher claims that the book is "at once a new volume of poetry by

Tom Paulin and a personal anthology of European poetry" (n.p.), finding it possible, or necessary, to blur the distinction between one's original work and translation – an attitude very symptomatic of the recent changes in translation studies. Two years later, another Irish poet, Derek Mahon, published *Adaptations*, a collection of poems rendered into English from French, Latin, Italian, Occitan, German, Greek, Russian, and Irish. Mahon is equally unwilling to call these poems "translations," thinking of them as versions or "imaginative, recreative (and recreational) adaptation[s]," mostly from cribs prepared for him by those who speak these languages. Mahon looks for a justification for this practice, by referring to its long "venerable tradition: poets use it to keep the engine ticking over" (11).

Similar problems with nomenclature, indicative of the need to redefine translation, can be seen in all literary endeavours that will be discussed in this article. Translation rather than standing for a precisely defined, homogenous activity, is in fact a 'continuum' of various types of responding to the original text, from verbatim, or philological translation to adaptation, paraphrase, and even further. Both in translation studies and in actual translation practice one can notice the growth of a belief that "the concept of translation as such can be stretched to cover all types of transformation or intervention" (Bastin 12). As with a 'continuum,' there are no clear boundaries between one type of translation and another. Without this ability to define where translation stops and adaptation starts, especially with scholars undermining "the sacred character" of the original (Lefevere 234), it becomes impossible to classify a given text as one or the other; it is often both, the difference being rather in our approach to it, with translation focusing on the relationship with the original text, and adaptation linking the text with the target culture. It is in this borderland that defies definitions, the territory of blurred genres that many modern poets have been recently working and, arguably, will be working in the coming decades.

The authors of the new genre that I would call, for want of a better word, "translation poems," are in many cases women and almost always poets in their own right. Let us have a closer look at three outstanding examples: *Tender Taxes* by Jo Shapcott (2001), *Memorial* by Alice Oswald (2011), and *A Double Sorrow: Troilus and Crisseyde* by Lavinia Greenlaw (2014). All three titles come from the last twenty years; all of them were published in the 21st century. The phenomenon of translation poems seems to be growing, deeply rooted in how translation, originality and authorship are being redefined today. Its increasing significance makes it justified to see translation poems as the poetry of the immediate future.

2. "We don't yet have the word for this kind of exchange": Jo Shapcott's *Tender Taxes*

Shapcott's *Tender Taxes* is subtitled "Versions of Rilke's French Poems," but we would not guess it from the book's cover: Rilke's name can nowhere be seen. It is

only from the front page inside the book that the reader learns that the poems have a foreign background. Shapcott is definitely unwilling to call them translations, or even to credit Rilke with authorship – she publishes them under her own name in a book of which she appears to be the sole author. It is significant that she has chosen this particular cycle of poems: works of a German-speaking Austrian poet who wrote them in French. The originals are then already foreign language texts. Shapcott's publisher, Faber and Faber, writes on the sleeve, as if ignoring the subtitle, that the poems are "more than versions." Her poems are supposedly "arguing with the originals, crossing and re-crossing the frontier between translation and origination" (n.p.). The wording here shows a veiled mistrust of the term 'translation,' which, unavoidable as it is, seems too narrow or burdened with too specific expectations to stand for Shapcott's project. The way out of this terminological conundrum is to blur the distinction between translation and original, between the translator and the author. In order to avoid misunderstanding, Shapcott in her Foreword assumes a more clear-cut position than her publisher and argues firmly that the poems in the book are decisively "*not* translation[s]" (emphasis mine). She continues her commentary by attempting to find the adequate term to describe her work: "my poems became responses, arguments, even dramatisations. I've called them 'versions' here, reluctantly. We don't yet have the word for this kind of exchange" (ix). It is interesting how the refutation of "translation" as the generic term results in a series of vaguely synonymous terms, as if one single word was not enough, each being too limiting for the kind of writing *Tender Taxes* represents: "responses," "arguments," "dramatisations," "exchange," "versions." Even the word that comes last is admitted only "reluctantly." Significantly, Shapcott seems to believe that this lacunae will disappear: "we don't *yet* have the word for this kind of exchange" (ix; emphasis mine). Shapcott wrote this Foreword in 2001; in the coming years she and other women poets, as I will discuss it later on in this article, would still be looking for an adequate word for their work. Shapcott leaves the issue open, ending her collection with a line from a poem by Borges: "I do not know which of us has written this page" (ix). Though his poem "Borges and I" plays with the difference between the speaker and the author, Shapcott's quote from a different (male) author and from a different language (Spanish) can be read as a statement of the universal condition of writing, which is always already polyphonic, always of dubious origin.

     What comes to the fore in Shapcott's renditions of Rilke's French poems is the gender relation between the contemporary woman poet and the man with the authority of being a classic, one of the outstanding figures of world poetry. By translating Rilke's poetry, Shapcott is re-writing the male poet's work and readjusting his perspectives. She is not adopting his voice, but investing his poems with her voice. The collection includes three sequences. In "Les Fenêtres," Shapcott makes Rilke's poems sound more natural and contemporary. In "The Valaisian Quatrains," which describe the landscape of the Valais in Switzerland, Shapcott changes the

tone: from pastoral to something darker. She also appropriates the poems to make them speak about her landscape, moving them from Switzerland to the borders of Wales, "where my family has its roots" (x). And finally, in the third section, "Les Roses," Shapcott discovers that the roses of the poems are in fact women, or even more, that "these poems were versions of female genitalia" (xi). What she then sets out to do in her *Tender Taxes* is to reverse the gender relations: if in his French originals the Austrian poet spoke to and about women, in Shapcott's versions it is the roses (women) who are given voice and made to speak. *Tender Taxes* are then translations which can be compared to contemporary appropriation art marked by such names as Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, or Richard Prince, being *per se* critical and involving "recoding or a shift in meaning" (Graw 214). Being an act of redress, of unmuting the muted, Shapcott's translation is a movement from French into English, from the early 20th century into contemporary times, from Switzerland to Wales, but most importantly perhaps from the male voice to the voice of a woman.

Shapcott's strategy can best be seen in the first poem of the cycle "Les Roses." If Rilke's poems remain numbered, but untitled, the English poet introduces titles: each poem of hers bears the title which is a name of a different species of roses. The first poem is called "Rosa gallica" (I), and is followed by "Rosa hemisphaerica" (II), "Rosa foetida" (III), "Rosa centifolia" (IV), "Rosa nitida" (V), etc. Calling the poems by names of roses introduces one more language, Latin, to this already multilingual project, as if the English poet, though speaking in their name, tries nevertheless to underline their autonomy: they are no longer Rilke's, but with their Latin names (and language of their own) they also belong to a different world than Shapcott's. Each Latin name, of course, has its English equivalent and the titles could have had a different form: Gallic rose (I), sulphur rose (II), Austrian copper rose (III), Provence rose (or cabbage rose) (IV), shining rose (V). The poet, however, decides to have the Latin nomenclature. The naming of individual poems using (foreign) names of the roses, which in Shapcott's versions speak for themselves, turns the poems into a series of short dramatic monologues with individualized speakers. Roses are no longer anonymous: having regained their voices, they have also regained their names. These are all telling names and almost in each poem Shapcott introduces images which explain them: *hemisphaerica* – "you see me half open," *foetida* – "dropping bruised scent," *centifolia* – "the hundred-petalled rose," *nitida* – "(you) make the flower glow," *sancta* – "you've made / a saint out of me," *damascena* – "catch a trace / of twice blooming damask," etc. The attributes of the roses which their Latin names identify not only individualize each flower, but also become themes of the poems.

The cycle's first poem, "Rosa gallica," leads to the justification of its English/Latin title, being a proper opening for Rilke's French poems. The fragment is, however, Shapcott's addition, absent in the original version:

I
Si ta fraîcheur parfois nous étonne tant,
heurese rose,
c'est qu'en toi-même, en dedans,
pétale contre pétale, tu te reposes.

Ensemble tout éveillé, dont le millieu
dort, pendant qu'innombrables, se touchent
les tendresses de ce coeur silencieux
qui aboutissent à l'extrême bouche. (Rilke 17)

"Rosa gallica"
If sometimes you're surprised
by my coolness
it's because inside myself,
petal against petal, I'm asleep.

I've been completely awake while my heart
dozed, for who knows how long,
speaking aphids and bees to you in silence,
speaking English through a French mouth. (Shapcott 59)

The Gallic character of the rose from the first poem of the cycle is identified in the last line as its mouth: it is a French mouth, which however speaks English. The phrase can be seen as the key to Shapcott's poems, and in a more general sense also as a metaphorical definition of translation, which is always a double-speak, a palimpsestic composition for two voices: the source-language voice and the target-language voice, the former being audible in the background, the louder the more we are aware of the text as translation (cf. Mahon's hope that his adaptations will be read "almost like original poems in English, allowing their sources to remain audible"). In her version of Rilke's poem, based on the opposition between the inner and the outer, between sleeping and being awake, between silence and voice, Shapcott applies these contradictions to the act of translation: to its opposition between the original, muted text, hidden beneath the English words, and its translated version, opening itself to the readers and speaking to them. Shapcott seems to overcome this opposition, to question the divisions suggested by Rilke and the traditional understanding of the art of translation that separates the original from its foreign language version, the author from the translator: it is the dozing heart that "speaks to you in silence." Or, as the publisher's note on the cover puts it: Rilke and Shapcott "are brought together in the shared incognito of a foreign language" (n.p.).

The silence invoked here by Shapcott is the communication beyond language, a phenomenon that unites as much as it separates. The lexicon of this silent

communication consists of "aphids and bees," the concreteness of the rose's femi-
nine world stands in sharp contrast to Rilke's male abstractions. This is Shapcott's
consistent attitude: not only replacing the second person by I, but also getting rid of
Rilke's abstractness in favour of her concrete images: in "Rosa moschata" (XVII),
for instance, Shapcott writes about dancing "around the stove," an image which
is absent in Rilke, but which elaborates upon the idea of "cooking up perfume":

> XVII
> C'est toi qui prépares en toi
> plus que toi, ton ultime essence.
> Ce qui sort de toi, ton ultime essence.
> Ce qui sort de toi, ce troublant émoi,
> c'est ta danse. (Rilke 20)

> "Rosa moschata"
> I'm cooking up perfume –
> attar of roses,
> absolute rose –
> dancing round the stove. (Shapcott 74)

Shapcott's disagreement with Rilke's abstract, fleshless diction is formidable: his
French "preparer" is rendered into English as "cooking up" and his even more
abstract "essence" changes in Shapcott's version into "attar of roses." The word
"attar," coming from Arabic, shifts the concept of ultimate essence to the physical
experience of smell. So when the "absolute rose" arrives in the next line, it has
already been made flesh. The experience Shapcott's rose is telling us about is
rooted in the material, sensual world, which finds its utter conclusion in the stove
with which the stanza ends.

Shapcott's argument with Rilke reaches its zenith in the poem "Rosa arvenis"
(VI):

> VI
> Une rose seule, c'est toutes les rose
> et celle-ci: l'irremplaçable,
> le parfait, le souple vocable
> encadré par le texte des choses.

> Comment jamais dire sans elle
> ce que furent nos espérances,
> et les tendres intermittences
> dans la partance continuelle. (Rilke 21)

> "Rosa arvenis"
> One rose is every rose,
> so you say, just as one word
> might be any other:
> sepal, stigma, filament.
>
> But then we can't speak floriculture,
> can't discuss botany at all,
> not even mention plant entropy
> or the taxonomy of roses. (Shapcott 64)

The second stanza of Shapcott's poem is her own: in these four reformulated lines she takes issue with Rilke, claiming that when we lose sight of the uniqueness of things, we will not be able to discuss botany, plant entropy or the taxonomy of roses. One rose is not every rose, she seems to argue with Rilke. Her reversal of roles, with female roses speaking to the male poet rather than being spoken to, enables her not only to start a "tender and taxing conversation" with him, but also to question his assumptions: "you'll find my roses addressing his, saying, in effect: It's not like that, it's like this" (xi).

3. "My approach to translation is fairly irreverent": Alice Oswald's *Memorial*

Ten years later another English poet, Alice Oswald, continues, albeit in a radically different vein, Shapcott's preoccupations, addressing issues of translation, authorship, and gender relations. With *Memorial*, her version of Homer's *Iliad*, she encounters similar terminological difficulties. Oswald, a classicist by profession, left out of Homer's epic about eighty percent of the text, keeping only short descriptions of warriors' deaths and passages of lyrical similes. Her version of the *Iliad* is free of any heroic matter, most of the narrative passages have been omitted, as well as the scenes with demi-gods, kings, and heroes; what the reader gets are death-scenes of warriors whose names, sometimes mentioned only once in the epic, would be unfamiliar to most of us. Oswald enumerates them at the very beginning of her poem, printing them in majuscules in one column, one below the other. The unadorned cataloguing of names goes on for eight pages, recalling similar lists seen on various monuments such as the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, the Srebrenica monument, or the Warsaw Umschlagplatz Monument Wall. The terminological problem surfaces first in the subtitle of Oswald's book: "An Excavation of the *Iliad*." Her use of a metaphor, instead of the technical 'translation' or 'version,' points to the uniqueness of the poet's endeavour – its originality requires a new term, bringing to mind Shapcott's comment "we don't

yet have the word for this kind of exchange" (ix). Oswald's term underlines one of the functions which her creative translation performs: she salvages or reclaims the forgotten or long ignored dimension of ancient warfare, its human cost buried under the male-centred heroic treatment characteristic of the epic convention. In this, her work of translation, as it was the case with Shapcott's *Tender Taxes*, may be seen as a work of redress.

Homer's epic poem starts famously with an address to the Muse and proceeds to the presentation of its hero, Achilles: "Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles son of Peleus, that brought countless ills upon the Achaeans. Many a brave soul did it send hurrying down to Hades, and many a hero did it yield a prey to dogs and vultures, for so were the counsels of Jove fulfilled from the day on which the son of Atreus, king of men, and great Achilles, first fell out with one another" (1; trans. Samuel Butler). Homer, opening his poem *in medias res*, omits the first nine years of the war, taking as its starting point Achilles' feud with Agamemnon. Oswald decides to start her poem differently, not with anger, but with a death toll:

> The first to die was PROTESILAUS
> A focused man who hurried to darkness
> With forty black ships leaving the land behind
> Men sailed with him from those flower-lit cliffs
> Where the grass gives growth to everything
> Pyrasus   Iton   Pteleus   Antron
> He died in mid-air jumping to be first ashore
> There was his house half-built
> His wife rushed out clawing her face
> Podarcus his altogether less impressive brother
> Took over command but that was long ago
> He's been in the black earth now for thousands of years. (13)

Oswald's opening poem is based on the fragment from Book II 695–710, in which Homer catalogues Grecian ships with their Achaean chieftains, Protesilaus being one of them, with an army of forty ships:

> And those that held Phylace and the flowery meadows of Pyrasus, sanctuary of Ceres; Iton, the mother of sheep; Antrum upon the sea, and Pteleum that lies upon the grass lands. Of these brave Protesilaus had been captain while he was yet alive, but he was now lying under the earth. He had left a wife behind him in Phylace to tear her cheeks in sorrow, and his house was only half finished, for he was slain by a Dardanian warrior while leaping foremost of the Achaeans upon the soil of Troy. Still, though his people mourned their chieftain, they were not without a leader, for Podarces, of the race of Mars, marshalled them; he was son of Iphiclus, rich in sheep, who was the son of Phylacus, and he was own brother to Protesilaus, only younger, Protesilaus being at

once the elder and the more valiant. So the people were not without a leader, though they mourned him whom they had lost. With him there came forty ships. (34–35; trans. Samuel Butler)

Homer's passage quoted above is not about death, but starts with a description of the richness and the beauty of the lands Achaean warriors had to leave to take part in the war. Protiselaus's death is mentioned here as if by the way, with a suggestion that although his wife wept after him and his people mourned him, his death was not a great loss to his people, who quickly found another leader. It is not the death of one of many replaceable leaders that finds itself in the centre of the passage, but a presentation of the contingent of forty ships from Iton, Pyrasus, Antrum, and Pteleum, heading for war.

In Oswald's rendering of the fragment death is both its starting point and its conclusion. She rearranges the order in which details of Protiselaus' life are recounted. The woman, who in Homer's narrative functions only as an element of the warrior's story, not an agent in it, but an object, also in the grammatical sense: "he had left a wife." In Oswald's version she acquires agency and becomes the grammatical subject of the sentence: "His wife rushed out clawing her face" (13). Apart from rearranging the scene, Oswald also introduces two time perspectives, one is Homer's narrator's, while the other is the perspective of the narrator of her own 21st century verse: "long ago" versus "thousands of years." The first phrase refers to the nine years that had passed since the beginning of the Trojan War, when Homer's account of it started. The second, "thousands of years" (13) is clearly rooted in our times. When we look at what is left of the Trojan War, we are aware of the phantomic presence of Homer's protagonists. Achilles is with us and will be returning for a couple of centuries in various literary and film narratives, Protesilaus, on the other hand, is the name known only to the afficionados of the *Iliad*.

Hector, whose name concludes Oswald's poem, is perhaps, along with Patroclus, the only well-known Homeric hero who appears in *Memorial*, though the English poet makes sure that her Hector has relevance to our times and turns him into a modern young man:

And HECTOR died like everyone else
He was in charge of the Trojans
But a spear found out the little patch of white
Between his collarbone and his throat […]
He was so boastful and anxious
And used to nip home deafened by weapons
To stand in full armour in the doorway
Like a man rushing in leaving his motorbike running
All women loved him. (71–72)

Oswald's final scene recalls Hector's love of Andromache, but deprives it of any sentimentality: leaving the poem, we are left with a picture of a woman, whose husband had been killed, and who has to take the responsibility for caring about his dead body:

> Hector loved Andromache
> But in the end he let her face slide from his mind
> He came back to her sightless
> Strengthless expressionless
> Asking only to be washed and burned
> And his bones wrapped in soft cloths
> And returned to the ground. (72)

With Hector returning "to the ground," Oswald's subtitle acquires deeper meaning of reclaiming from the earth not only, as Schliemann did, the ruins of the city, but also the remains of those who attacked and defended it.

It is significant that Oswald's American publisher, W.W. Norton & Company, found the term "excavations" too extravagant and replaced it with the unproblematic "version." The 2012 British edition by Faber and Faber calls the poem "a brilliantly original new poem which is also a translation" (quoted from the cover), echoing the editorial note in Tom Paulin's book (cf. "It is at once a new volume of poetry by Tom Paulin and a personal anthology of European poetry"). The phrasing here is indicative of the publisher's attempt to close the gap between translation and originality. Oswald's poem is both original and translated, which redefines the latter as an active and creative process. Oswald herself does not seem to feel uneasy about the use of the term 'translation,' declaring that she understands it in her own way:

> [M]y approach to translation is fairly irreverent. I work closely with the Greek, but instead of carrying the words over into English, I use them as openings through which to see what Homer was looking at. I write through the Greek, not from it – aiming for translucence rather than translation. (2)

It is an interesting passage in the poet's attempt to catch the uniqueness of her work, though revealing also the persistency of the problem the poet has with the term 'translation.' She is ready to risk a contradiction in her short pronouncement quoted above by claiming that what she approaches is translation and that what she aims at is not translation. It is as if the word, being rejected for all the problems it causes and assumptions it evokes, returns unwanted.

In the same paragraph of her Preface, Oswald introduces an important distinction, saying that while her "'biographies' are paraphrases from the Greek, my similes are translations" (2); yet how she manages to distinguish between

paraphrases and her "irreverent" usage of translation remains unclear. In the passage quoted above she reinterprets the term 'translation,' adjusting it to her own ends and moving it closer to what could be called paraphrasis. If Homer's words are treated as openings leading the poet straight to the world described, Oswald's goal is to see what Homer sees and to respond to it in her own terms. In order to achieve it, she has to neglect – although she does not admit it – Homer's language that mediates between the reader and the described world. That this mediation may in fact be something more – a creation of that world; that words cannot be separated from what Homer 'was looking at' is not an issue for Oswald. What Homer – the blindman! – was looking at is available to us only thanks to the words he uses.

Oswald's *Memorial* – an original new poem which is also a translation – intrigues as a poem with an interplay between fragments and the whole. The term "excavations," which Oswald prefers to "versions," prepares us to accept the *Iliad* in its truncated form, with its seven-eighths of the poem lost in translation. Excavation is a process of reclaiming works of art in their fragmentary form – and *Memorial* is fragmentary. The sense of reclaiming is nevertheless supplemented by the sense of loss. Oswald reclaims by wiping out, she excavates by burying. Homer's work in her rendition is as much a work of saving, as it is the work of erasing. In this Oswald may be reminiscent of Georges Perec, whose novel *La Disparition* written twenty five years after the Holocaust was composed by eliminating the letter e from the writer's alphabet, or Robert Rauschenberg, who in 1953 produced one of his works by erasing Willem de Kooning's drawing (*Erased de Kooning Drawing*).

4. "…a practice of free borrowing and blithe reinvention": Lavinia Greenlaw's *A Double Sorrow*

Lavinia Greenlaw's *A Double Sorrow* with the subtitle "Troilus and Criseyde" was published in 2014, three years after Oswald's *Memorial*. As the publisher's note informs us, Greenlaw's poem is a "rendering of Chaucer's captivating love poem" (n.p.), thus establishing a link between Greenlaw's book and Chaucer's work, though Greenlaw's version of the narrative is very free and Chaucer's name is mentioned neither on the cover, nor on the title page of the book. In fact, the story of the two lovers is neither Greenlaw's, nor for that matter Chaucer's. The author of *The Canterbury Tales* found inspiration for his poem in Boccacio's *Il Filostrato*. Boccacio, however, cannot lay claim to the authorship of the poem, as his work was in turn based on *Le Roman de Trois*, a 12th-century work by Benoit de Sainte-Maure, or rather its Latin version by Guido delle Colonne. Sainte-Maure's work followed the narrative of Latin recension of Dictys and Dares, whom Homer mentions as his predecessors. With such a proliferation of authorships the poem's origins become dispersed, making it nearly impossible to say what the original

of Greenlaw's *Troilus and Criseyde* is, the poem travelling through centuries, languages and cultures, translated and re-translated. In its history, the concept of originality undergoes a radical dismantling, corroborating what scholars, like Lefevere, would point out that "all 'originals' draw on prior sources" (234).

Fiona Sampson, in a review in *The Guardian* quoted on the back cover, claims that "*A Double Sorrow* is not a simple translation. Instead, in an act of imaginative reconstruction, Greenlaw has filleted the original, lifting telling phrases and key narrative moments and making them her own." Here again, one sees how difficult and unhandy the term "translation" is. The reviewer uses it, yet finds it necessary to modify its meaning by saying that it is not of a "simple" kind, in a way that resonates with Oswald's uneasiness about the very term when she says her attitude to translation is "irreverent." By claiming it is not a "simple translation" the reviewer both legitimizes the term and distances herself from it, finding it impossible to get rid of it. The word, however problematic, proves unavoidable, if only to be later modified or contested. The reviewer calls it "imaginative reconstruction" and evokes the concept of appropriation, when she notices that Greenlaw makes the poem "her own," or, more tellingly, that she "lifted it." This corresponds with the poet's comment on the historical context of the *Troilus and Criseyde* narrative. Having acknowledged Homer's importance in this history, she remarks that the *Iliad* only mentions Troilus, Paris's brother, and hardly touches upon the narrative itself, though the name of Troilus crops up in various other pre-Homeric stories. In the Middle Ages, however, the narrative took its shape, when medieval poets "took hold of these old tales and established a practice of free borrowing and blithe reinvention." Each of these terms, "free-borrowing" and "reinvention," can be used in describing what Greenlaw does with Chaucer's text, having been authorized by the practice common in the times of Chaucer himself. And yet, when she tries to define the nature of her poem she introduces a new term: "It was the imagery, rather than the story, that made me want to write my own version – which is not a version, and certainly not a translation, but an extrapolation" (xi). The poet uses the general term in order to negate it, provides us with the name for her work only to upset it: "my version […] which is not a version" (xi).

It is symptomatic of the problems contemporary poets face with naming the kind of exchange they are engaged in. If Shapcott speaks of "versions," and Oswald of "excavations," Greenlaw decides to introduce a more technical term, "extrapolation." The verb "to extrapolate" comes from mathematics, where it means to "calculate approximately from known values, data, etc. (others which lie outside the range of those known" (OED). The poet tries to elucidate her extrapolation method in the preface:

> I've jettisoned characters and scenes, and made some borrowings of my own. I've taken an image or phrase (which in the Chaucer may be a passing mention or something played out over hundreds of lines) and have used it to formulate each small but

irrevocable step in the story. At times these are different aspects of the compacted emotions mentioned above. At others, they are decisions, gestures and (rarely) actions. (xi)

That Greenlaw uses a scientific term here should not come as a surprise, knowing the poet's interest in science and her use of scientific imagery in her earlier poems.

To see how radical Greenlaw's extrapolation is, one can compare the description of Troilus' death in Chaucer's original (and in a modernized translation by A. S. Kline) with the way the author of *A Double Sorrow* dealt with it. The fragment comes from stanza 260 and the beginning of the next stanza, lines 1814–1822:

> 260
> And doun from thennes faste he gan avyse
> This litel spot of erthe, that with the see
> Embraced is, and fully gan despyse
> This wrecched world, and held al vanitee
> To respect of the pleyn felicitee
> That is in hevene above; and at the laste,
> Ther he was slayn, his loking doun he caste;

> 261
> And in him-self he lough right at the wo
> Of hem that wepten for his deeth so faste

> 260
> And down from there he spies
> this little spot of earth that with the sea
> is embraced, and begins to despise
> this wretched world, and hold it vanity
> compared with the true felicity
> that is in heaven above. And at the last
> down where he was slain, his gaze he cast.

> 261
> And in himself he laughed at the woe
> of those who wept for his death now past. (Chaucer 445)

In Greenlaw's version these twelve lines have been compressed into seven, but more radically the eighty-four syllables of the original text have been reduced to thirty-two. Greenlaw, as with all fragments in her book, gives the passage a title, which makes it more autonomous and focuses on what the poet thinks is the thematic core of the passage:

He is his own happiness

He looks down on what he has left:
A spot of earth
Embraced by the sea
A city
A camp close by
A field where men weep
And he laughs. (Greenlaw 217)

In *A Double Sorrow* this is the final stanza, the poem's conclusion, though in Chaucer's work there are still six stanzas before the end. Greenlaw cuts short not only the poem, but also the sentence, leaving out the object clause in the effect of which Troilus's laughter appears self-sufficient, its motive – unspecified: "And he laughs" versus "he lough right at the wo of hem that wepte for his deeth." The poem in Greenlaw's version returns to its beginning and echoes it by contrast: sorrow, even doubled, is replaced with laughter. Troilus's death signifies his liberation, or, as the title of the passage makes it clear: happiness.

The only 'original' image Greenlaw has kept is "A spot of earth / Embraced by the sea." Apart from that, the minimalist catalogue includes three details that point to the narrative that Troilus has just exited: the narrative of the Trojan War with the city, a (military) camp, and a field with weeping men. Liberated from the vicious circle of violence, war, dubious heroism, and death, Troilus can only laugh – in sharp contrast to the tears of warriors. Greenlaw's version is free from Chaucer's moral and theological commentary, which runs for the next six stanzas. If Chaucer is ready to oppose the wretched life on earth with "the true felicity / that is in heaven above," Greenlaw relies entirely on objectivist diction, preferring concrete images, expressed by a succession of three unadorned nouns – city, camp, field.

5. Conclusion

The three English women poets discussed here are by no means the only ones who make use of translation and redefine it, by questioning the authority of the text and contesting the very concept of originality. The translations they make are their new poems, it is their names that can be seen on book covers, though the source text never disappears from view and readers are always reminded that they are reading a polyphonic, polylingual work. The three poets find the traditional understanding of translation too limiting, in consequence they look for other terms that would define their creative work more adequately – rather than talk about translations, Shapcott prefers to talk about "versions," Oswald about "excavations," Greenlaw about "extrapolation." The search for the proper, accurate term continues: Patience

Agbabi, who published *Telling Tales* (2014), her version of *The Canterbury Tales*, calls her poems "remixes" taking the term from the language of contemporary music. In each case, whenever the poet speaks about her work, the term *translation* crops up and is contested, as if she found it both unavoidable and dissatisfying. In effect, we often come across the poets' comments (and editorial notes) composed of contradictory, mutually exclusive statements: the work is a translation and is not a translation. Shapcott, Oswald, and Greenlaw are examples of women poets appropriating the works by canonical male writers in order to subvert them, revise gender relations, re-imagine and re-write classical texts.

Scholars identify various factors which make translators resort to adaptation; among them the "disruption of the communication process: the emergence of a new epoch or approach or the need to address a different type of readership" (Bastin 5) seems to be the condition shared by the three women poets discussed here. In times when assumptions underlying the male-centred cultures of the past can no longer be upheld and a readership looks more critically at the veiled manifestations of dominance and discrimination, they feel the need to turn to classical texts and adapt them. This kind of practice seems to me one of the most inspiring and widespread aspects not only of today's poems, but also of the poetry of tomorrow.

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