

Marie Darrieussecq, interviewed by Fiona Cox (08/06/2012), translated by Fiona Cox

FC: At what age did you study Latin at school?

MD: I started when I was about twelve or thirteen and kept up with it for a long time, until I was nineteen and preparing my entrance exams for the Ecole normale supérieure. My mother was adamant that I should do it. Latin was a way of selecting the brightest pupils - you either took German or Latin. And doing Latin ensured that you went into a good class. It was an undercover way of streaming pupils, because the education system of the French Republic doesn't go in for streaming. The classes are all equal. But I was half-hearted about studying Latin. I wasn't very good at it, and I was rebellious. I didn't like it. I couldn't see the point of it. And I wasn't a good pupil when I was preparing the entrance exams. My marks were very poor.

But as soon as no-one was making me do Latin I began to take an interest in it, not so much in the language as in its body of literature. And I was able to discover things that we hadn't necessarily covered in school, like Suetonius or Apuleius. But I was never a specialist at all. And in fact I was much more interested in Ovid than in Roman culture. It was Ovid with whom I really fell in love.

FC: Was that because of the *Tristia* in particular?

Yes - it really was because of the *Tristia*. In fact I thought it was very unfair that this book had been so forgotten, and that's why I wanted to translate it, because all of Ovid is brilliant but, to my mind, the *Tristia* is his best book. It really is, because it's the most contemporary, it's the one that speaks to us most directly. We can actually hear his voice. The sheer presence of his voice is unbelievable. When I was translating him, I could hear him speaking. And in the *Metamorphoses* and the *Fasti* his voice is far more enmeshed within Roman culture generally. In the *Tristia* he is isolated, a Roman trying to survive, all alone in the middle of nowhere, and I think you can hear the isolation of that voice, as if it's the voice of a ghost, the solitary ghost of a world that has disappeared. At the time he was writing, his world hadn't disappeared, but he knows that it's going to, and for him it's as if it has disappeared because he's left all alone somewhere else. It's as if he were talking today. I think it's a literary masterpiece.

FC: I love the image you gave of the ghost standing at your shoulder reading your translation, even as you're writing it. And what I find really very moving in your translation is that the blank verse allows you to have lines where there's only one word in the text, which highlights the solitary voice and Ovid's loneliness.

MD: That's right – yes. I did take liberties because in Latin there are no commas or full stops – there's just the rhythm of the poetry and that was very liberating. There was a freedom in the scansion – I didn't have to end the sentence at any specific point. One of the things to which I've taken exception is that all the translations of Ovid [into French] – absolutely

without exception – are punctuated. It's ridiculous – it's just inaccurate semiotically. Apollinaire informs my approach a great deal.

FC: So there are echoes of Apollinaire in your translation?

MD: Yes – it was subconscious, I think, but Apollinaire is certainly there.

FC: That's very interesting, because when I was reading your translation there were moments when I was thinking of the poems that Eluard wrote when Nusch died. Were you aware of inscribing your translation within a French literary tradition?

MD: Yes – yes, absolutely. There's also a very beautiful book of poems by Jacques Roubaud called *Quelque chose noir* which is about the death of his wife and his life as a widower, which is written in blank verse. I think that all of that was in my mind when I was translating. I wrote *Tristes Pontiques* just as I was emerging from *Tom est mort* - immediately afterwards. It's a book about grief. It's the sequel to *Tom est mort* – it really shares the same quality of emotion. It's stronger than melancholy – there's a real rending there. Ovid's grief is pretty violent – he's mourning everything. Often he's mourning his own self. He weeps over his own disappearance. And I found that enormously powerful.

FC: He's in exile at the ends of the earth, just as the narrator is in *Tom est mort*.

MD: The ends of the earth – that's a theme I love. And he really is, in fact, at the ends of the earth. I wanted to spend some time with him to try and understand how he felt – what did the ends of the earth mean at a time when this literally meant the ends of the earth? I found the idea of this mind-blowing in fact. The very idea of reaching the ends of the earth is something from the realm of science fiction. The planet that he inhabited was absolutely not the one that we inhabit. Not least because, at that time, he thought that it was flat. He knew that they were nearing the ends of the earth, that it was frozen. It's a world that is very different – mentally, spiritually and geographically – yet at the same time there's that voice! That's how we might talk. For example the way he talks to his wife is very modern. His love for her is full of respect. He's a man in love with his wife. He misses her. I think that's really beautiful. And it's a very simple book, which really deserves to be translated into simple language. As I point out in the Preface there's no point in talking about 'cultivating Helicon'. 'Cultivating Helicon' means absolutely nothing today. 'Cultivating Helicon' used to be a proverb. Obviously he's put that in for the poetry. It was a cliché. But you're not going to translate it like that today – it would be absolutely ludicrous!

FC: You're absolutely right. The average reader would just put the book right back on the shelf if they read that. I was also interested in the ways in which your translation echoes your novel, *Le Pays* which I very much enjoyed. Throughout that novel there's the theme of a language which is dying out.

MD: Yes, that's true. I hadn't noticed the link, but I'm very interested in languages which disappear and in linguistic isolation. To my mind if there's a link with *Le Pays* it's through the animals, the weird fauna. *Tristes Pontiques* is a book that's full of animals that draw on the *Metamorphoses* as you've said. There are many, many animals that draw on the animal world, in particular the story of Procne. In *Le Pays* there are a lot of animals in the course of the book.

FC: And when you were writing *Truismes* . . .

MD: Ovid wasn't on my mind at all.

FC: Really? Because there are a lot of critics who have noticed a resemblance between the two works.

MD: Yes, I know, but Ovid wasn't on my mind at all. Everyone talked about Kafka, which is daft. It's completely different from Kafka. There's a gulf between Kafka and women, and Kafka and women's bodies. In actual fact Ovid and even Homer with the transformation of Ulysses' men into swine belong to a tradition that I found much more inviting, but it was pretty subconscious.

FC: That's fascinating, because quite apart from the theme of metamorphosis that you share with Ovid, there's also this theme of showing you're human by standing upright,

MD: You're the one who noticed that¹ - I didn't realise there was a link. I studied the *Metamorphoses* at school. I don't remember which bit.

FC: So how did it come about that you are so interested in the works of authors like Ovid and Suetonius if you weren't very keen on Latin?

MD: I liked Suetonius because it was quite smutty and looked good. I remember reading and enjoying *The Gallic Wars* because in some ways it was like an adventure story, and I found to amusing to see the way in which we, the Gauls, were viewed by barbarians in this book. Cicero bored me – my God he's tedious. Saint Augustine was good.

FC: And Virgil?

MD: I didn't really take to Virgil, but I was wrong. Virgil's language, his Latin, is very difficult. And I liked Tacitus a lot, but that's really hard. I read it in French. As for Virgil, I recently

¹ See Kathleen Hamel, *Ovid's Metamorphoses in French Literature and Art* Unpublished doctoral thesis. University College, Cork, 2012.

reread the *Aeneid* in French and thought that it was quite poorly translated, but I told myself to just let it drop. After all I can't spend my whole life translating Latin.

But I feel a connection to Ovid, to his fate as I said in the Preface to my translation. A highly successful author who loses everything, absolutely everything, from one day to the next. It's unimaginable. And I was very moved by the way in which he re-established links to the local population. The fact that he bothered to learn Getic and Sarmatic. The fact that once again he brought trouble upon himself. I think I can identify with his sort of gauche innocence. He's got quite a childish side. He's a very touching figure – both over-civilised but at the same time a little bit hopeless and gauche. He's a little like a child.

FC: Yes – he needs his wife.

MD: And his cushions, his villa, his home comforts. He sank into a terrible clinical depression. It's interesting. The *Tristia* are a story about depression. His depression is killing him. His life reads very like a novel. In fact before I'd even thought about translating him – to be honest I didn't want to translate him – what really interested me were the *Tristia* and the *Letters Ex Ponto*. I was amazed to see that the translations really weren't that great, or were simply excerpts. I really wanted to write a biography of Ovid, a fictionalised biography. I've read Christoph Ransmayr's book, *The Last World*, which, as it happens is published by my publisher POL. I found his way of completely dreaming Ovid's life very interesting, but didn't agree at all with the image he gave of Ovid as a sort of super-guru, who had settled in very well where he was and who was practically a wizard with all of his metamorphoses. I'd have liked to have done a very realistic biography. I'd have liked to have told his life, while giving myself some license, but not really focussing on the fantastic. I'd have liked to have told the story of his sea voyage. Anyway, I told myself that if I were going to write this book, I'd have to read him. So I began to take notes and as I did so I told myself that it was unbelievable just how poorly translated it was. I told myself that I'd have to start by translating him.

FC: There are moments in the translation where Ovid speaks about Hippolytus, and you add in Phaedra's name, which I found very interesting.

MD: There were times when I told myself that I'd have to give a little more context and explanation for a contemporary reader. Today's readers are much more familiar with Phaedra than with Hippolytus, I find.

FC: And I liked the conjunction of their names.

MD: Yes - they're very beautiful names. I did it for the rhythm. I changed this part a lot.

FC: Yes, but one of the effects you create is that the conjunction strikes us all the more because of the scandalous relationship. And there was a lot of Baudelaire there as well, perhaps because of the theme of exile.

MD: Yes. 'Mon enfant, ma sœur. Songe à la douceur d'aller vivre là-bas ensemble.'

FC: Yes, and also 'Au lecteur'.

MD: It's possible, yes. We learnt Baudelaire by heart at school, so there must be some very deep-rooted influences in me.

FC: And here you have these tiny lines, which evoke a voice that feels very humiliated, that is very weakened. It's very moving.

MD: Yes – sometimes Ovid abases himself in a way that is very painful to see. All that begging to Caesar makes you cringe. I've abridged quite a lot of that. The most beautiful letters are the ones he writes to his wife. I found his descriptions of the country sublime. That's what I liked the best – the letters to his wife and the descriptions of the country. And I really loved the one where he says: 'There's nothing here. I haven't found you a present. All that I can find is a bow, arrows or a quiver.' I think that's beautiful. He gives us a feel of the time. You can see how bare everything is. When you read the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* you realise just how few references there are to manufactured goods. And I think that gives us an insight into today's world and the programmed obsolescence of our goods. In Ovid's day an object was precious – it was made to last a lifetime.

FC: But you can also feel the misery of not being able to give a present to the woman he loves.

MD: Nor to his best friend. It's the same. He really loved him. And this friend ends up getting assassinated. His name is Carus, so of course there's the word play of 'carus', 'cher' 'dear.' He has to deal with these complicated politics. He knows that the letters will put those who receive them in a compromised position. And that's why at the beginning he doesn't use names. When he gets to the *Letters Ex Ponto* he gives up on that and says 'Too bad. I'm going to write down names.' And in fact Carus does disappear in mysterious circumstances, probably assassinated by those in power, by Livia or perhaps Tiberius at that time. His is a very tangled, very mysterious story. What happened to him? There's that as well. There's his wife, the barbarians, the landscape and the detective story.

FC: You've spoken of the success of your translation which has sold four thousand copies, which is phenomenal for a translation of the *Tristia*. Do you think we're living at a time when people are more interested in exile?

MD: Why did people go out and buy the *Tristia*? In the first place there was my name. People were perhaps curious about why I'd translated that. And then I think we're still fascinated by Pompei. Pompei continues to haunt our imagination. It seems to me that we'd already experienced a tsunami. It was a time when there were earthquakes, and there was the sense of living at the end of an era. And I think that that feeling of the end of a world speaks to people today. I think that it speaks directly.

FC: With the possibility that you might lose everything?

MD: That's it – the possibility that you might lose everything. The possibility that everything is going to disappear and that you're going to lose everything personally, individually. Ovid is a prototype of modern man – he was rich, surrounded by material goods and he lost it all. His story is our story. That's what we most fear. And the rise of the barbarians, the contact with the barbarians is, deep down, like the take of the far right on the Islamists. And what's really beautiful about this book is that it's humanist. In fact Ovid tames his own fear and he says 'I'm the one who's a barbarian.' And that's an observation that is completely humanist. It's an anachronism. It's a fantastic observation. He reaches the point where he can say: 'I'm the barbarian.' His intelligence just blows my mind. He understood that we are always a barbarian in the eyes of someone else. Maybe that's why the book was successful – perhaps because of its content. Ovid's torment is the story of our times.

FC: Yes – modern man who has lost everything.

MD: He's recognised everywhere he goes. He's a man who's made it. He has everything. Love, fame, money, comfort, slaves. Perhaps in the history of the world he's one of those who had the most, who had a kind of absolute success. And he lost it all overnight. He's a kind of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, not in terms of sex, but in terms of the person who lost everything. France is absolutely rivetted by Dominique Strauss-Kahn because he lost everything. He ought to have ended up being President of France, but he lost it all. We're absolutely fascinated by the fall.

FC: There are also all those bankers who've met with catastrophe.

MD: Yes – that's true.

FC: Did you ever feel that you were following in the footsteps of writers like du Bellay or even Vintial Horia?

MD: Du Bellay – yes. His work is beautiful. I haven't read him for a long time, but I was thinking of him recently because of the wars of religion.

FC: Do you think that you approach these works differently by virtue of being a woman? I think you're the first woman to translate the *Tristia*.

MD: I think there was another woman who translated them at the same time – Danielle Robert. I don't know which of us published first, but we were translating them at the same time. And she's translated everything, every single word of Ovid. She published a translation of the *Tristia* with Actes Sud. It's a very erudite translation and she stays much closer to the text than I do. She's an academic, so she's very punctilious about accuracy, and her translation is much less poetic at heart. It's a very different kettle of fish.

FC: And when you were translating *Antigone*?

MD: I approached *Antigone* in much the same spirit. My translation was simpler than the ones that already existed. I tried to recapture its simplicity. One of my friends who teaches ancient Greek told me that the language of Sophocles is simple. His Greek is quite accessible in comparison with other Greek writers. But there again there is absolutely no point in translating proverbs – you need to find an equivalent in modern French. But that translation took me a very long time, and since I didn't publish it I've rather forgotten it. It's stored away in my computer. And in fact it was never performed. Maybe one day.

FC: Oh, that is a shame.

MD: Publishing it would have been complicated - there was a matter of rights.

FC: And are you the first woman to have translated *Antigone*?

MD: Yes – maybe I am. We'd need to see if Jacqueline Romilly has done something, but I don't think she has. I think that I'm the first. But in fact that's a very well recognised historical phenomenon. It was always men who were teachers and there you go.

FC: But what I'm wondering is whether you have a different take on *Antigone*?

MD: Yes – I once took a seminar on *Antigone*. In this seminar which took place over a year I had a specific take. I don't believe in a woman's viewpoint, I believe in a feminist viewpoint. I don't think I'm any more sensitive to the text; but I am able to take a political, feminist stance. And so I approached *Antigone* from a feminist stance which was particularly shaped by Judith Butler who's written a book about *Antigone*. Judith Butler is an American feminist who is scarcely known in France at all.

FC: She's quite difficult to read, but very interesting.

MD: Yes – she's fascinating and in this seminar my approach to *Antigone* stemmed from Butler's feminism. How is a woman constructed? What is a woman? Antigone is ordered to be a woman, and she rebels, but she is nevertheless a woman, just in a different way. And so it was possible to look at the tragedy in this light. When it came down to it it was a matter of disobeying her duties to femininity rather than disobeying her duties to the state. She refuses to be that kind of woman and she becomes a woman in a completely different and very modern way. She's a kind of prototype. I think she's the first to become a woman in this way. So I don't have a feminine angle; I have a feminist angle.

FC: That's something that's in *Truismes* as well.

MD: Yes, absolutely. People don't want that kind of woman's role imposed on them. I was in the process of adapting *Antigone* while I was running this seminar, and so my adaptation was very shaped by the way I was thinking. And it was a seminar that owed a great deal to psychoanalysis as well because of Lacan, who in a seminar called 'On Ethics' said some very beautiful things about *Antigone*, even if one can't always agree with them. There you are –

Antigone from an ethical point of view. At heart I'm not very interested in antiquity. I'm only interested in the characters. I'm interested in Ovid and I'm interested in *Antigone*. What really interests me about *Antigone* is that she lost her brother. That's at the root of the myth. When Creon asks her over and over again: 'Why are you breaking the law?', one of the explanations that she gives is that you can replace a dead husband. If your son dies, you can have others. But you can't replace a dead brother. It's a very surprising justification. To say today that 'a dead son can be replaced' - well that's the whole story behind *Tom est mort*. It's horrific.

FC: *Tom est mort* is a very painful book to read.

MD: It's an exorcism. And for what it's worth my own personal story is that I am the daughter of parents who lost a son. I've been haunted by *Antigone* ever since I learnt the myth at school. I really told myself that my role was to bury my brother. It's a very complicated, very dark family story that I'll tell one day. I have difficulty envisaging writing the story while my parents are alive, but they are very very damaged by the death of this child, and my father has never been able to speak of it. He's only spoken of it twice, very briefly. It's a huge taboo in the family. He's a child who doesn't have a grave, whose body disappeared. And so *Antigone* really spoke to me, because one thing that I'll never be able to do is to bury my brother, and burying their son is what my parents couldn't do. So the whole idea of a young woman who breaks all the laws in order to scatter earth on her brother's body - well it's the myth of my life. So I need to translate and to adapt *Antigone*, and I wish I had ancient Greek precisely because I want to rediscover its original, simple language, free from the veneer of academia. What I really want to do is to unearth the body from the text. That's why I say I'm not interested in antiquity - I'm interested in my own foundation myths.

FC: It's surprising that you thought relatively late on about doing this translation because when one reads your novels - *Truismes*, *Tom est mort*, *Le Pays*, *Naissance de fantômes* all the themes that you tackle - grief, ghosts . . .

MD: Yes - it's not by chance. It took a long time to get round to the translation because I needed a year for it, but as soon as I heard about these letters, as soon as I read them - half in Latin, half in French when I was eighteen, everything was there for me - the ghosts, the absence, exile. I was already writing a little bit, and I knew that this man was very close to me. I haven't gone anywhere without his letters. It's been a journey. And when I was at the Ecole normale supérieure there was a joke, a kind of running joke amongst the students who were doing Latin. The Ecole normale was a building in the middle of Paris - a lovely building - really beautiful and there was some accommodation there. But there were too many of us for the number of rooms. So some students were sent out to two other sites. There was one place in the 14th arrondissement which was just about OK, and there was another place on the outskirts, beyond the périphérique which we thought was just appalling.

FC: It was exile.

MD: It was exile. And I had a friend who was really, really good at Latin and who would quote lines from the *Tristia* in despair, all because we were on the other side of the périphérique.

FC: Ovid would have understood! I was wondering whether you'd read Kristeva's book *Le Vieil homme et les loups*, which is also heavily influenced by the *Tristia*.

MD: No, but it's a very common theme. Mandelstam wrote his *Tristia* in direct reference to Ovid. Celan talks about Ovid as well when he speaks of Mandelstam. It's a kind of *mise en abîme*.

FC: You've succeeded in bringing Ovid into the hands of ordinary readers, which is something that academics rarely manage to do. Do you think that the future of a writer like Ovid is safer in the hands of authors like you rather than academics? For example we have Ted Hughes whose translation of the *Metamorphoses* is highly successful and who introduced a lot of people to Ovid.

MD: Well I don't think I'd have done that translation if it weren't for my university teachers, so I think there's a kind of collaboration. There's something of a trend in France for translating ancient authors. There's a new translation of the *Bible* by writers, which is really good. And Pol have brought out a retranslation of Saint Augustine by Frédéric Boyer. I think that it's quite a natural instinct to try to give ancient texts a modern flavour. They certainly need that, otherwise people won't read them.

Writing requires such energy. You have to invent something from nothing. And translating is great. You have all the same pleasure of looking for just the right word, but the material is all already there. I think of it like knitting – you make progress, and you know that that's going to grow. It's not too taxing. You have to concentrate, but you can dream a little bit at the same time. You're required to be judicious. Writing entails an utterly passionate investment of yourself – it's exhausting.