

Josephine Balmer, Poet and Translator

in interview with Lorna Hardwick

Oxford, 17th May 2010

LH This is Lorna Hardwick for the Reception of Classical Text Research Project, 17th May 2010 in Oxford and I'm talking with Josephine Balmer, the poet and translator who is going to answer some questions about her work.

Thanks very much for joining us, Jo.

JB It's a pleasure.

LH The first question is what first drew you to working with classical poetry?

JB Well, it's funny you should ask me that because we were talking about that this morning, and the first thing that came into my head was sex! I think that's probably just the poets that I've worked with, but I was studying classics and I was quite frustrated at the lack of opportunity that there was to really work with translation on a normal classical degree course. And in fact it was probably positively discouraged for you to do that as a student. So I think it was born out of that frustration, that I wanted to engage with the texts in a more literary way, and so it came out of my studies in the first instance.

LH Why do you think that working with translations was discouraged at that point?

JB I think that text was seen very much from a philological perspective and that they were for a grammatical exercise. I mean obviously we had literature courses but there was a big division, as I'm sure you know, between working with the text in the Greek and writing essays about them in English. But if you turned in a piece of work that, say, gave a poetry translation we were sort of told to go away and do it again in prose, which was quite interesting. I mean, I suppose at the time I didn't bother to ask questions because I was just a lowly undergraduate.

LH Do you think that people internally thought of their literary criticism as based directly on their philological work or did they mediate it through a kind of translation in their mind, even if it never reached the page?

JB I think that's a very, very interesting question. I think they probably obviously did. I think the kind of gold standard that you were looking for was that you actually read it in Greek and thought it in Greek while you were studying – and of course nobody can do that really – but I think that in people's minds, yes, there was this distinction and when you are writing your literary criticism that you were filtering it through as maybe a literal translation and then you were doing your other work and you were meant to be doing that in Greek or Latin.

LH Ok. Now tell me a bit about the particular Greek and Latin poets that you chose to work with and which you chose and why and has your choice changed over the years?

JB Yes. Well, I started with Sappho and again that came about because at the time there wasn't really a translation in Britain – I think Mary Barnard's translation was available on import – and I really wanted to read one myself and in the end I ended up translating it because I couldn't find one. And that moved me on to look at other classical women poets who were even more forgotten. While I was working on Sappho I sort of uncovered other poets that I'd never even heard of and that was a voyage of discovery. So then I worked on them and did a volume on them. Then I took a complete sort of right turn and worked on Catullus, although that does seem in a sense a continuation of working on Sappho because of his translations of her work. But also because I had been working on Roman elegiac poets like Sulpicia and very much enjoy translating that form and Latin, you know, sort of witty Latin poetry, and I suppose that led me to Catullus.

And then I worked on Ovid's *Tristia*. I think perhaps there's an undercurrent here of often working with poets that are quite neglected and have been left on the shelf, sort of wallflowers, if you like, at the party, because a lot of the poets that I translated in *Chasing Catullus* as well,

were poets like Claudian who had just been long, long neglected. So there must be a little part of me that wants to sort of rescue them! And *Tristia* again is a very neglected work until quite recently.

LH Apart from the sheer virtue of rescuing something that's been neglected, are there things you can identify that you discovered in working on that lesser known material that seemed important to you, both in terms of your poetry and also your translation work?

JB Yes, I think so. I suppose with every poet – there are so many of them now it would be a different thing that you've discovered – I think there is more of an opportunity for you because – leaving Catullus aside from the equation – I think there is more of an opportunity for you as a writer when somebody isn't so well known because there isn't this huge bulk of previous criticism sitting on your shoulder and previous translations that you've got to ignore and get on with your own work; you can actually just focus on it a lot more easily.

LH Can I take up the point that you made about the criticism, because one of the things I think is very interesting about what you've achieved, is that in your work on Sappho, for instance, you were able to identify aspects of her work that perhaps helped scholars in the process of reconstruction of fragments and so on. And this was presumably coming at it from a literary point of view?

JB Yes. Yes. Yes, I think – coming at it from a literary point of view, but I did also do a lot of scholarship as well and I think it's very important to do both. Even though my translations might often look like they're very, very free and far wide of the text, I have done an awful lot of scholarship in order to get there.

LH So, tell us about how you set about doing that? Does the scholarship come first?

JB Yes, I always think of it a bit like a painter, an abstract painter, who does very, very close, detailed studies, figurative studies, before approaching their abstract work. So I would start with a literal translation. Then on the facing page of a big note book I would write down all the points that I've read in commentaries that might help, because you are trying to excavate meaning from the text and obviously that meaning is not static – it's fluid. But I think it does help you if you read the scholarship and you uncover what might be layers of meaning. I mean we can say this is definitely what Catullus meant or this is definitely what Sappho meant but it helps you to engage with the text, if, for example, you read in a commentary that Sulpicia is using a lot verbs that might have legal overtones then that gives you a way in into the text.. Or in Catullus 5 that he's using a lot of again quite technical expressions from accounting. Maybe that was subconscious at the time when he did it, who knows? But that gives you as a writer and as a translator a way in to start working on the text and I think without that scholarship, obviously, you wouldn't be able to do that.

LH Would it be fair to say that a translator is also a commentator?

JB Yes. very definitely. I think it's Pound who says that translation is a form of literary criticism – one of the highest forms of literary criticism, because it is one of the art forms in which you are writing and reading at the same time. And obviously there are different levels of it. I mean not everybody wants to do a great wad of scholarship before approaching a text, a lot of writers would feel that that would interfere with their creative process. But it just works for me. To me it is my own reading of the text as well as my own writing of it.. Personally, I feel it has to be an informed reading. Even if I don't necessarily agree with a lot of what has been written about the text before.

LH What about translators, re-writers, poets, if you like, who are engaging quite closely with the ancient material but don't have a knowledge of the Greek or Latin? They perhaps work from somebody else's close translation. What are the differences in the eventual writing do you think?

JB Well, I think obviously there are going to be a lot of differences. I wouldn't want to quantify it. I think that all the work is worthwhile and interesting and adds a lot to the life of the text, but I think that there are bound to be differences We were talking about my poem 'Fresh Meat' based on the *Iliad*, and there I used stock terms like 'knee loosening' - which I knew from the Greek, - in a way to subvert the text. And I could use that in a homo-erotic context within the poem [in 'Fresh Meat' it becomes: 'a man/ who would bring you to your knees']. But those

sorts of things, those sorts of re-writings, can only come out of close knowledge of the text. That doesn't mean to say it's better to have a close knowledge of the text but it makes your version different to the version that somebody who is doing it from a literal might come up with.

LH Now, you've worked a lot across the borders between translation, re-writing and new work. What do you think are the demands that those make on the writer?

JB The different demands, between translation and original do you mean?

LH 'Translation', 're-writing' and 'new work', I mean I'm using scare quotes because they're very fuzzy border lines and they run into each other.

JB Yes, they are very fuzzy. I know. I'm asked this question a lot. People will ask me, 'What do you think is the difference in your work between a translation and an original poem or a transgression,' and to be honest I've reached the stage where I just don't know. I have to be honest about that. I mean when I start a piece of work, I don't know whether it's going to be a translation or an original poem that has a basis in a text or whether it's going to be a poem that subverts the original text. It just actually comes out of some kind of creative process that I don't really understand. x I have in the past tried to explain it and I realise that I haven't really got the vocabulary in which to do so.

LH I wonder sometimes whether questions that focus on those differences or perceived differences are not actually now rather redundant questions and that it's better to engage with the outcome whatever it is on its own terms.

JB I think that's true. I think we've moved on a long way from Dryden saying, 'You have imitation, paraphrase and metaphase,' and everyone's trying to define each piece of work within, say, those three boundaries or others. I mean there are plenty of others but, yes, I think we have moved on and I think we've accepted that there is a blurring. I indicate in *The Word for Sorrow* [in the end notes] where I've used Ovid's *Tristia* and also where, within the same poem, I used my own original work as well. The way I described it there was that Ovid's *Tristia* started to bleed into my original text and that happened more and more as the work went on. I found myself merging the two. It was as if the boundaries broke down as I was in the act of writing the collection because it does have a narrative drive and I did tend to write it in the order in which it appeared. So the more I engaged with Ovid, the more he started appearing in my original poems.

LH I was going to ask you about the kind of influences that you felt you'd been subject to, and it seems to me I ought to be asking you about poetic influences but also about influences from translators and from the kinds of varied approaches one gets.

JB Yes, yes. I mean certainly from a poetic point of view Michael Longley is obviously a huge influence. His versions of Homer were incredible and I remember being very, very struck when I read them. I had already started doing that sort of work myself. I'm thinking this is odd, no-one else is doing this and then I read Michael's work and I thought this is just amazing. [eds note: see M. Longley, *Collected Poems, 2003*, and information on Longley's classical work at www2.open.ac.uk/classicalreceptions] Translator-wise, I mean obviously Pound is always going to be a huge figure, and because he was so articulate as well in what he wrote about translation; and also his attitude is very, very inspirational in the sense that he got a very, very hard time from classicists in particular with his 'Homage to Sextus Propertius'. I think one Latin professor said there was nothing left for him now but suicide. And he actually took the translation off the title of the book because he was so upset by the reaction, but he was able to say, 'Well, actually, this is what I do,' and carry on. And I think that's quite inspirational as well, especially at that time. And modernist poets who were influenced, you know, like HD and so on. The way in which fragmentary poetry ...

LH Yes, I was going to ask you about HD. She was somebody who very much blurred the poet/translation boundary. Are there specific ways in which she influenced you? Or are you feeling you write against what she was doing?

JB No, no, no, I think when I started out she definitely did influence me, because when I did my translation of Sappho ... I mean the way in which the form of the translations, the form they take was very, very influenced by the modernist work on fragments. Letting the poem fall across the page like a sort of torn fragment comes directly from those modernist poets. And I

think now that has become much, much more accepted as a way in which to approach fragments, so that you can use that form, the serendipity, the way in which they survive sort of becomes part of the form in which they appear in English.

LH Now you've talked quite a lot about form and one of the things I wanted to ask you was about the relative importance of the form or the theme in the poetry that you're working with. Which is more important to you or are they different starting points?

JB Mm. I think that's a very, very interesting question. I think probably one is very often drawn by the theme of a poem because they are sometimes so overwhelming that they just sort of suck you in. But as you work on the poem you become much more interested in the form than you thought you might have been. I think I mentioned I became very interested in translating Sulpicia which is a form that I hadn't before – that is, elegiac - and here were complete poems as well, quite new to me because I had been working so much with fragments – so I became very interested in that and that led me on to wanting to translate Catullus because I wanted to engage with his poetic form as well. So I think, yes, it's both, but probably for me in the first instance it might be because I remember a snatch of a poem even and I think, yes, that was so strong, I want to do something with that. 'I want some of that,' I think Simon Armitage put it. 'I want to use that.' But then you start engaging with the poem and you realise that there are very interesting things to be learned as a writer from the form of it.

LH When you're working with the ancient forms do you find that things then persist from the ancient into the modern, without you initially being aware of it. Almost as if the form brings certain things with it that you then have to engage with or sometimes struggle with?

JB Yes, definitely. Yes, I mean obviously elegiac couplets, epic form etc, etc. You do have to engage with it, you don't want every single translation to look exactly the same, if it's Homer or Catullus or Ovid. So you do find that again it's seeping into your work and that it is becoming much, much more important to you and you are learning from it, definitely.

LH Are there ways in which you find that you have wanted to actually push back the ancient form or the poetics because you are beginning to feel that your own work is being dominated by that or is it a negotiation you've managed to do?

JB Yes, I think on occasion, again, it really varies from situation to situation, but I was just, funnily enough, thinking about this point in regard to *The Word for Sorrow* and Ovid's *Tristia*; whereas some of the versions of Ovid are very, very much as they appear in Ovid's original poems. A lot of them are much, much shorter for obvious reasons, and some of the versions of Ovid become very impressionistic, so that they don't follow his form at all. I've just taken maybe four or five lines from a poem and turned it into either a whole poem or a stanza. So I think it very much depends on the situation, but I think it's like everything else, the more you engage with the form – again I'm thinking about abstract painting – the more you are breaking it down to its key elements. So you're just seeing blue, brown, green, red. But I think that's something that comes with the work. You were asking as well whether it impedes your own ...

LH Yes, I was wondering if you ever felt constrained and you felt that writing in English, you actually want a different kind of form.

JB No. No. I think you write out of ... What I think I'm trying to say actually is that what happens with me is that I find the form very, very interesting, very, very useful; it's a good lesson because translation has very often been seen as a sort of educational form for writers, as an educational task, but you can end up writing out of it. So, actually the form itself has taught you a lot creatively and you end up coming out the other side and so you've assimilated a lot of it and then you're breaking it down to key elements.

LH We've talked quite a lot about the intersection between the ancient and the modern in your work. What about another kind of intersection, which is the intersection between the classical in its various manifestations in your work and your non-classical work, if I can use the term?

JB Yes, yes.

LH What kinds of ways has that taken for you? I mean, how important has the classical work been in inspiring and directing the non-classical work and vice versa?

- JB Again, that's a very good question. I think it's quite interesting actually that quite often I start writing a poem which I think is going to be completely non-classical and ends up being classical or having a classical edge to it! I was just thinking because I was thinking about *The Word for Sorrow* for this afternoon and there's a poem in there about visiting the war graves in Gallipoli and at the very end we come back to the Latin dictionary which I didn't really know I was going to do when I started writing it. So, it's difficult ... I'm not quite sure.
- LH Do you think that's happening because of associations in your own poetic imagination and sensibility or is it ...?
- JB Yes. I think the way I've expressed it before is to say that classical – not language – but classical images, classical themes, classical metaphors, classical poetry are for me the vocabulary with which I write and so quite often even when I'm not thinking that I'm going to be writing that, that vocabulary comes back and it has sort of over the years become that way. I mean, obviously, clearly, there are quite a lot of poems which have no classical basis. Even so, I'm just thinking in *Chasing Catullus* ... funnily enough quite a lot of the ones that didn't have a classical basis in the final section of the book, I actually gave them subtitles, for example, of themes from the *Odyssey*. I'm thinking of the poem about selling a house in Cornwall and in fact that's called 'Sirens.' When you come to the contextualisation stage I've actually somehow managed to bring it back into a classical milieu.
- LH That raises very interesting questions, I think, about the kinds of metaphors that a poet, particularly a poet who's also a translator, works with. The ways in which people talk about translation has changed over the last few years and there's been a much closer examination of the notion of translation as metaphor, as opposed to reliance on notions of accuracy, fidelity and so on, however interpreted. Is that approach the kind of approach that you are sympathetic to, or are there other kinds of words you would want to use to characterise translation?
- JB I think it is an approach I am sympathetic to. Charles Tomlinson said that it wasn't so much metaphor but a metamorphosis, in other words, again I think he was using an analogy with painting [note: he was, in fact, quoting Georges Braque], that it is the building blocks, the basis on which your work progresses and is constructed. But yes I think metaphor/translation they are basically the same word, aren't they, Greek or Latin. So I don't think you can get away from that.
- LH I'm interested that you and your reference to Tomlinson are using the word 'metaphor' in a very precise and rather sort of formalised way, whereas a number of critics who've used it are drawing much more on a tradition, perhaps from Plato which implies that there is a gap between the metaphor and the form of the ancient text and what is in it which can only be represented imperfectly through the metaphor.
- JB I think that in the loss there are so many gains that you can't really see it in those terms. For me what translation does metaphorically is that it restores the text; it doesn't destroy it. It actually is carrying it forward in the configuration of time and space. You know, this is what is moving a text forward. This is what's reconstructing the fragments. This is what's bringing back the performance to the drama. So maybe you're just bridging it.
- LH When you are talking about translation, almost as a kind of transmission of the text, I think it raises a very interesting problem about the relationship between, shall we say, a scholarly translation that is intended for students or for non-classical academics, and the kind of translation which increasingly is evident in creative work, maybe in the case of people like Longley or yourself, quite close translation which is an integral part of the new work. And that kind of translation creativity is going to shape people's future perceptions of what the ancient texts were like and how they operated and so on. And you talked about losses and gains. What do you think would be the most important losses and gains from that kind of transmission?
- JB Sorry, when you say that kind, do you mean the sort of school crib or the Longley ...?
- LH No, no. I mean the kind of transmission through a new text which is going to attract a wider readership and going to shape people's perceptions of what the ancient authors were doing.

- JB I think, personally, usually what the greatest gain is perhaps even meta-literary, if you like, it's the reading; it's the new reading that you get of a text. And that is what in many ways is keeping it alive. So having read Longley's 'Ceasefire', you then can't actually read that scene in the *Iliad* – in the same way. So it's as if, again, Longley has added to the life of the text because now we have a completely different way of looking at that scene between Achilles and Priam. [eds note: *Achilles kills Hektor and abuses his body in Iliad 22; Priam supplicates Achilles for the return of the body in Iliad 24*]
- LH And it's such an iconic scene, isn't it?
- JB Yes.
- LH It had a major role in the film *Troy*, for instance.
- JB Yes, yes, which I don't think it would have done otherwise.
- LH It is the bit of the *Iliad* that everyone is going to know.
- JB Yes, it's probably the best bit. If you're going to do your classical work in extract and I think the ancients did read a lot in extract, didn't they themselves? You know, we forget that; we think everything has to be complete. But they just took the best bits as much as anybody else. Yes, it is, it's the highlight of the *Iliad* and I think what is interesting, particularly if we take that poem, is that who could have thought that there were going to be any more readings that would turn it on its head. You would have thought, haven't we said everything we need to say at that scene? But actually it's the poet and also I think the scholar as well in Michael Longley who comes along and says, 'Hang on minute – we've got something different here.' And then scholars alike, when they read the *Iliad* know that is going to be there. That is on the table. That is now not going to be erased from our reading of the scene and I think that's one of the most fascinating and exciting things about it. It's a beautiful poem – it's a sonnet, I think yes it is a sonnet, isn't it? The form of the poem is beautiful as well; I mean it's not just what it says. Everything about it is perfect and the fact that the day that it appeared [in the *Irish Times* in September 1994 after the announcement of the IRA ceasefire] everything about that... it's perfect!
- LH And the way he – Longley – actually inverts the sequence in Homer so that in his concluding couplet that's the point at which he gets to the supplication and kissing the hand of the person who has killed his son. And so that is what hits you.
- JB Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. And I think that's a very, very interesting point that purists might sometimes balk and say, 'Oh but it's not in that order.' I mean I've done that with quite a lot of my Ovid versions, where you take a line that's halfway down the poem and for my own purposes, because I was trying to create a narrative drive, I moved it up to the front of the poem so that it could run on from the originally poem that had come before it. I wanted the whole thing to flow in a seamless way. But purists quite often object to that and say, 'But that's not the way that it is in the text.' But that is another thing I think that poets or poets/translators can do.
- LH And sometimes that can actually resonate with something that is in the ancient poets' technique. I mean foreshadowing in Homer, for instance, you know, and inversion of chronology. One could say that actually Longley is being quite faithful to the poetic technique of Homer in using that technique.
- JB Yes, and you kind of wonder – it's *Myrmidons*, isn't it, Aeschylus's *Myrmidons*? – I think there were a few fragments which survived with Achilles and Patroclus and they're quite homoerotic. It's almost like the poet can not only forecast in a way our present reading but it's almost like somebody's plugged in to some kind of ancient fragmentary reading that has been lost.
- LH Which over time ebb and flow according to the ways in which poets and translators are actually coming in and out of it.
- JB Yes, exactly. Yes.
- LH Can I ask you now about future directions, future plans that you've got?
- JB Yes, you can. Actually at the moment I'm doing some what I consider kind of quite Cavafy-esque if that is a word, poems, as I've always been drawn to Cavafy and especially to the fact

that he's spent quite a long time in Liverpool which is where my father was from, so there's a sort of personal interest and I just found this very incongruous. It's a lovely idea of the Alexandrian poet growing up in Liverpool and speaking Greek with this 'slight English accent' which was probably a scouse accent, one imagines. So the translations I suppose, they're still versions of text but more in that Cavafy way in which you take an incident, often quite an obscure incident from an ancient historian or whatever, which quite often Cavafy would just sum up in a dramatic monologue, either in the third or the first person. I've been working on some poems in that ilk. I'm still using texts, I'm still translating because there will be a tiny little story in Plutarch or a tiny little story in Pliny. So you can do a translation and you can use some of the imagery that's there but then spin it out into an original poem ...

LH So would you say it's Cavafy's mode of approaching these things that's influencing you?

JB Yes, yes.

LH Rather than your engaging directly with Cavafy's text?

JB It's his mode, yes, and his incredible voice, I think, is something that I was feeling that I was very drawn to and wanted to study a bit more: the way in which he creates these characters out of very, very small situations. I mean that's only half of his poetry because of course you have the erotic poetry as well. But, yes, those sorts of things, some of them are the things that have occurred to me – I've written poems about – have been Roman or Greek, but actually what I was looking for was stories that are maybe British, that is set in Roman Britain. For example, I've just written a poem for *Agenda*, I think the next issue, based on a tale about a cup that Petronius owned. I bought some earrings in Castleton in Derbyshire, made of Blue John which is only mined in Castleton. They had a little leaflet in with the box with this story about how Petronius had a chalice made of Blue John which Nero wanted when he committed suicide – I couldn't remember this at all – so Petronius smashed it so that Nero couldn't have it. I found the source reference in Tacitus's *Annals* and I think there was something in Pliny as well. So I translated the little passages and then made a poem about Petronius having this chalice from Derbyshire – an incredible idea in many ways - which smashes at his point of death. So it's that sort of thing.

LH Yes, that's fascinating.

JB Yes, it is. So there's little bits of fragments. They're always around actually.

LH I'm so struck that at several points in our discussion we've actually been hitting on ways in which scholarly work and poetic creative practice seem to coincide without anybody having intentionally brought it about. In scholarship now the interest in 'the history of the object' seems to be happening at the same time that you're engaging with that poetically.

JB Yes. That's right. Yes.

LH We've had all this work about Homeric epic and the importance of lyric in Homer which has been happening at precisely the same time as people like Longley have been actually taking episodes from Homer and writing short poems.

JB It's interesting, isn't it? Is it just serendipity or is it just a sort of psychic crossover? It is very, very interesting. One of the things I always find about scholarship though, I mean inevitably, is that, for example, when I looked up this story about Petronius's chalice I found out they don't think it's made of Blue John at all; they think it's made of something from the East [it is now thought that myrrhine – the term Pliny uses - does not refer to British Blue John] and scholarship does always deflate your lovely mythical ideas that you might have. And it was the same obviously with Ovid and *Tristia*. Did he write it from Rome or did he actually go into exile? It doesn't really matter whether you believe it was a hoax or not; as soon as you read that theory, you go back to the text and you see actually it's not nearly so intense and raw as you think; it's actually very tricky and ironic. So sometimes scholarship can deflate you as well. But what I think is very interesting is that you have this idea in your head and it's classical romanticism in a way, you know, this wonderful little myth. And then you read the scholarship and the myth gets deflated. But actually what you do is then find ways to bring in the deflation of the myth as well into your work. So there's another layer, for example, with the *Tristia* I soon realised – and we're going to talk about this again this afternoon – but I soon understood that there were many different complex levels operating in Ovid's voice. First of all I'd wanted that –

the *Tristia* – to pair with poems about Gallipoli because I saw it as being very emotional and raw. And I think I wrote at the time that it seemed to me one of the rare instances when the mask of classical artifice slipped. And then I read a lot more scholarship and discovered, 'Well, hey, hang on a minute, maybe it isn't. Now what am I going to do with this because I've got all these poems about Gallipoli and I can't have them being ironic and tricky.' However, then I thought about it some more and I realised by looking at the sources I'd found online from Gallipoli soldiers – their diaries and letters – that they had this same kind of mix of tone, because you're writing a letter home from war, you're not going to say, 'It's horrible, people are being blown up all over the place.' You're going to make little jokes and ...

LH So there's a certain kind of artifice ...

JB Yes, yes, exactly.

LH ... that creeps in indifferent ways at different points.

JB There's artifice everywhere and I suppose it's just an ironic tone can work with you as well as against you. So the scholarship can, no matter what it throws at you, trying to engage with it can actually result in much more interesting work than you thought possible. And I suppose it's the same process – my work is nowhere near on this level – that early poets like Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey, when they were trying to find out how to translate Petrarchan Sonnets. Actually the very difficulties that they encountered ended up being a positive force for English poetry. And it's always that, whatever you come up against, you have to find a solution for. That's why I don't really agree with the idea that anything's untranslatable; I think everything is translatable. It's up to you to find the way to do it.

LH And that different translations then in turn talk to each other?

JB Yes, they talk to each other and the way in which you might find your solution might then throw up all sorts of interesting things that are going to lead you and maybe even literature in different directions. People might not agree with the way in which you've translated it; they might say someone's done it better, or they might say that it's technically wrong, whatever. But you can always, always find a way. And I think that perhaps one of the most interesting interfaces between translation and creative writing is that when you start doing that in translation, it is of course of necessity going to mean that your own work is going to be pushed forward. Because you're up against these incredible obstacles, , you've got some joke in Catullus that no-one has understood for two thousand years and you've got to translate it. There's no way round it. You can get some help. You can have help from a footnote, for example. You can have your apparatus or whatever to help you but you've got to do something with it. And that's got to help you creatively as a writer.

LH Because you've got to express it in a way that engages with modern sensibility and with word patterns.

JB Yes, exactly, exactly. And again obviously, scholarship can help you too but I think that's another thing that translation does. Translation makes us laugh at two thousand year old stale jokes and that's why it is really a wonderful thing. I can't say that often enough and that is why it is a tool for the writer.

LH That's great. Thank you very much, Jo. I think this is the point in the conversation where I ought to really hand over to you and say, was there something that you would like to talk about or points that you want to make that I haven't given you the chance to?

JB No, I don't think so actually. I think we've covered quite a lot of ground and perhaps I should have prepared a statement! But there were very, very interesting questions there.

LH Well, I'm glad we haven't steamrollered you too much.

JB No, no, no. It's very, very interesting ... I think that's the first time anybody's asked me about form and theme for a start. Obviously, I'm asked a lot about the connections between translations and original poetry.

There is something that we haven't touched on actually, just very briefly. This is something that I do bang on about a lot but I think, again, it's something that Michael Longley does too, and that is this use of what I call juxtaposition in a work, so that it's not just that your translation exists in isolation, it exists in the frame of the book and what I found very, very

interesting is to use that frame of the printed book or the magazine extract or whatever it is, so that translations and original poems, transgressions, whatever we're calling them, can speak to each other.

LH Could you give us an example from your own work?

JB Yes, I can. From *Chasing Catullus*, for example, we have in the sequence that I wrote about my niece's illness, one poem called 'Set it in Stone', which is a series of grave inscriptions; the first two were classical grave inscriptions for little girls from I think Mary Lefkowitz's source book and then the final stanza is actually an original little epigram that I wrote for Rachel. Then the following poem, on the opposite page, as it were, is an original poem called 'Demeter in Winter' and we can see there immediately - you just see the title and you know - that we're going to be following on from the death of a child to the mourning of the mother. It's such an incredibly difficult thing to write about. And, as I've said before, I don't think there was any other way to write about it except through this prism of translation and classical mythology because any other way to do it would be just too raw for writer - and for reader as well. Then I can use that classical mythology, writing about Demeter, but it is an original poem. Again, you can see how the sequence follows on in that way on the page. And of course in *The Word for Sorrow* every poem is a pair more or less. So you get the versions of Ovid's *Tristia* and then poems about the dictionary that's being used to translate it.

So any possible example from there, but another one that springs immediately to mind which is quite easy to explain is Ovid's poem [*Tristia* 3.3] written - it's a trope, a classical trope - when he's sick and he writes his own epitaph. This is followed in the book by a poem about going to the British cemeteries on Gallipoli and looking at the graves there. It was a very moving experience because a lot of the graves were of men whose letters I had uncovered. I didn't know them from Adam when I started but they had become known names to me and in fact the bodies aren't there because they never found them. They're just little empty graves with people's names on. So Ovid's quite tricky poem where he writes a very tongue-in-cheek epitaph, although the poem actually turns itself around, and ends on a very, very sombre note, then can lead in to a poem about going to this graveyard.

And again, I think that's a very difficult thing to write about. It's very hard to find new things to say about the First World War. You'd think everything has been said in poetic terms and using Ovid as a frame, as a pairing, as a juxtaposition, a re-contextualisation means that you can, somehow at least I hope, have found something new to say about that tragedy which hasn't been said before.

LH I think that exploration of the relationship between independence and inter-dependence, those things probably actually does frame very well what you're doing in translation and creative writing.

JB It's obviously difficult because you don't want them to be poems that can only be read in sequence, you also want them to be poems that can be read in isolation because people like to read poems in isolation, so they've got to work together; they've also got to stand on their own.

LH Marvellous. Jo, thank you very much.