POETRY COMMENT

Two recent collections by Josephine Balmer, while superficially rather different, are unified in important and richly resonant ways. Both are concerned with one of the archetypal poetic themes: the dialogue between possession and loss. Both volumes are built, in profound and learned (though the poet wears her learning unobtrusively) senses, on the continuity of the classical world (particularly its literature) with our own, of how, specifically, many of the texts of the classical era speak to us with remarkable directness and emotional clarity, of how much in classical poetry can help us to understand and articulate our own experiences, our own thoughts and feelings.

Of course to many earlier eras of our poetry such statements would have seemed so self-evidently true as to be unworthy of utterance. To, say, Milton, Dryden, Pope or, indeed, Tennyson (who, as a boy could recite all of Horace's odes by heart and much of whose mature poetry is firmly grounded in Virgil) it was altogether natural to assume that their own poetry should grow out of that of the great classical poets. Although the last half-century has seen a growth in new translations of the classics, Josephine Balmer is relatively uncommon amongst contemporary poets in the way in which her poetry is similarly grounded, in a body of work in which the boundaries between translation, imitation and originality are blurred to fertile effect.

The Paths of Survival (Shearsman Books, 50 Westons Hill Drive, Emersons Green, Bristol, BS1 6 7DF. 94pp; £9.95) is the more obviously scholarly undertaking, its starting point and its conclusion alike being a lost play by Aeschylus. Aeschylus wrote something like 80 plays, but only 7 survive. One of the many plays now lost was *Myrmidons*, a drama on the doomed love of Achilles and Patroclus. *The Paths of Survival* begins (in a poem ironically titled 'Final Sentence') with the poet herself (in Oxford University's Sackler Library) looking at a fragment of papyrus:

whose mutilated words can just be read,
one final, half-sentence: *Into darkness...*
Prophetic. Patient. Hanging by a thread.

This almost illegible five-line scrap, which may end with the italicised words, has been thought to be, perhaps, part of Achilles' lament over the dead Patroclus from Aeschylus' play. This encounter with a tiny fragment redolent with the "ache of absence, wrench of nothingness, / stark lacunae we must all someday face", serves as prelude to a series of poems, most of them cast as dramatic monologues, which narrate (obliquely) the history of the recovery (as much by luck as by design) of probable or certain fragments of the lost *Myrmidons.* The 'speakers' of these poems are librarians, archivists, archaeologists, classical scholars and others.

Balmer presents them under several headings, such as "Custodians", "Excavators", "Editors", "Scavengers" and "Translators". Some of these 'discoveries' were of actual papyri, others were made by the identification of quotations from the now lost play embedded in the works of post-Aeschylian authors who did have access to texts of the play. The series is a reminder of the fragility of textual survival, a fragility which we can look at elegiacally, as it were, but which also has a distinct beauty of its own. Balmer closes her book giving us a verse translation of the rediscovered fragments, as assembled by Alan H. Somerstein (Aeschylus, *Fragments*, Harvard University Press, 2008, pp.134-49). Before we get there we are introduced to a gallery of remarkable characters who played a part in the survival of such lines of *Myrmidons* as we have. They include Richard Porson ('Draughts'),

Giovanni Aurispa ('Hoard'), Hunayn Ibn Ishaq ('Hunayn's Gold') and Gerard of Cremona ('Gerard's Constellations'). The remarkable Porson (1759-1808) was the son of a weaver and a shoemaker's daughter in Norfolk. In early childhood his great intelligence and his extraordinary powers of memory were evident (Balmer suggests that he "probably had a photographic memory"). With the aid of a number of patrons he was able to go to Eton and then become an undergraduate at Trinity College, Cambridge. In 1782 he was awarded his B.A. and also elected a fellow of Trinity. Just ten years later (i.e. in 1792) he was elected (unopposed) Regius Professor of Greek in Cambridge. Balmer calls him (in her note on 'Draughts') a "bibulous and foul-mouthed classical scholar". One might add that he was often ill-mannered, maliciously witty and downright rude. His excessive drinking (even Byron referred to Porson's "bestial intoxication" in Cambridge) did not hinder his prodigious memory and scholarship. Balmer's poem presents a Porson aware that his drinking was a defence against the excessive weight of his learning:

I drank to make it go away, the Greek
I thought in, dreamt in, that slurred my speech
far more than village burr I was born with –
the farm boy who had conquered Cambridge.
I took six jugs of port before breakfast:
at dinner, wine, ink, dregs of fellow-guests.
But still my drowned memory did not fail.

They said I hiccupped Greek like a helot,
spewed out sewer English...

They thought I should abstain, the idiots.
I was mulched from Norfolk soil, sky-soaked stock.
And we all sip from the same poisoned pot.

It was knowledge now, could not be forgot.

I had some familiarity with Porson before reading *The Paths of Survival*, but was largely unfamiliar with many of the other figures the book introduces to its readers, such as Giovanni Aurispa (1376-1459), born in Sicily. After studying in Bologna he took employment as a tutor in Greece and began the serious study of classical Greek; in Greece, and then, on a much larger scale, in Constantinople he began to collect Greek manuscripts in great quantities. It became an obsession and by 1423 he was able to bring to Venice the largest collection of Greek texts yet to reach the west, introducing many previously unknown works:

In the Bazaar I battered shirt and sword,
careful its hawkers did not sense the worth
of the books they had piled up as if soiled.
For here was the hoard of forgotten worlds,
discoloured texts as dark as clouded pearls.

...I had no lovers, I knew no passion
except for this, for words. My life's breath. Air.

I intend no slur on Balmer's verses if I say that I found her notes almost as fascinating as the poems themselves. The provision of notes to a collection of poems can stir strong feelings, either way. When they are good, I find myself in agreement with what Ronald Johnson wrote in introducing the notes to his long poem *The Book of the Green Man* (1967): "Notes are an encumbrance to poetry, usually, but at the same time I lust after books with a certain 'Ohio soil', a rich silt of bibliography, books which lead to other books.". Johnson, who died in 1998, would have loved - as I do - *The Paths of Survival*. Perhaps he would have shared my view that Balmer is one of the most consistently fascinating and inventive (as well as 'traditional') of contemporary poets.

GLYN PURSGLOVE