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Digging Deep
Josephine Balmer: *The Paths of Survival* (Shearsman Books, 2017); *Letting Go: Thirty Mourning Sonnets and two poems* (Agenda Editions, 2017).

Although at first sight these two books by Josephine Balmer seem very different in content and style, on a second or third reading similarities emerge. I hope to tease out both the contrasts and comparisons over the course of this review. Let us start with the elements they share. The clearest and most obvious similarity is the stress on grief – in the first instance, in *The Paths of Survival*, we encounter a dramatic re-enactment of Aeschylus' lost play, *Myrmidons*, which imagines Achilles' suffering at the death of his warrior-friend Patroclus, and in the second, in *Letting Go*, we have a record of Balmer's grief at the death of her mother. Grief then is viewed, in its elegiac mode, as an eternal human verity, bridging the millennia, both fictively and non-fictionally. The second similarity is a stress on classical learning – in *The Paths of Survival* it is Aeschylus' work which is reconstructed, in *Letting Go* the poet's grief is viewed from the standpoint of texts by (amongst others) Homer, Heraclitus, Sappho, Virgil, and Livy.

The method (if one can call it that – it is not at all systematic) is a constant redefinition and re-establishment of classical standards and models, applied within a modern poetic context, demonstrating the continuity of experience, what Balmer calls a strategy of 'connecting past and present, both distant and recent, in an urgent, common chain of humanity', reconfiguring texts which are (in her own words) 'lost, disputed, fragmented, often requiring more reconstruction than translation'. So it is in *The Paths of Survival* she is interested in telling the tales of those involved in the remaking of a classical text over the centuries: the archaeologists, custodians, excavators, editors, scavengers, translators, anthologists, scribes, annotators and copyists who worked on *Myrmidons* – unearthing each 'displaced scrap of frayed papyrus' which reveals the pristine clarity of the play's language (what T S Eliot called 'fragments against our ruin', and Balmer 'dividing cells, bare blocks/of collective memory'). She is fascinated by what might be termed the archaeology of the word: 'lost worlds… retrieved/in the flash of forceps, sifting piece/on tiny piece, word on broken word', the scholarly care taken over the intricate process of collation. One is reminded of Basil Bunting's words on Pound's *Propertius*: 'London or Rome, does the name, the ostensible date, much signify? We are amongst contemporaries, listening to a contemporary, the difficulties are the difficulties of our own lives' – or of Geoffrey Hill's words on Yeats' work: 'The poet is hearing words in depth and is therefore hearing, or sounding, history and morality in depth'.

Balmer herself writes (in her monograph, *Piecing Together The Fragments*, 2013): 'The discovery and subsequent publication of new Sappho fragments, in particular, was one factor in the creation of Imagism in the 1910s, which was partly inspired by the clarity and minimalist beauty of fractured Greek lyrics'. Those Imagist poets she argues (I think rightly) were looking for 'a clearer, cleaner, more sparse poetic', and that I would argue is precisely what Balmer achieves in her own work. She also notes that 'William Carlos Williams was later to include versions of Sappho in his epic poem sequence *Paterson* (1946–1958)'. Here we have the intellectual roots of her own poetic technique.

The Paths of Survival is a reconstruction built from very scant materials. Balmer's translation of the lines (vestiges, traces) that have come down to us by scattered means provide the trigger for the poet's imagination, marshalling what we know of Aeschylus' play

itself, in addition to material from Aristophanes' comedic plays *Frogs*, *Peace*, and *Assemblywomen,* the Oxyrhynchus fragments, Athenaeus in his *Supper Sophistries*, Lucian in his *Erotic Tales*, Photius in his *Lexicon,* documents in the libraries of Baghdad and in the monasteries, museums and libraries of Europe. Balmer's debt to these precursors is clear throughout the sequence, unravelling, untangling the threads of the poetry, creating a new mosaic. The precariousness of the text is analogous to the vulnerability of life itself, represented in the poem by Patroclus' death, and Achilles' dirge for his lover:

How could you forget the solemn bond
We forged together, thigh wrapped
Around thigh?...
....Let me honour
Our passion, such sacred communion
Between the thighs

a lament voiced as he cradles Paroclus' corpse, adding

Yet for me, there is no stain, no sin –
I am absolved because I loved him –

his sorrow clinched with the emphatic line: *Soon I will follow you into darkness*.

Balmer hints that the overt homosexuality of Aeschylus' play may have caused it to be censored or banned in Christian times, and may have been the primary cause of its almost total loss to tradition. A similar fate, after all, befell Sappho's poetry, as Charles Simic has argued: 'It took extraordinary malice and determination over the centuries to destroy nearly every extant poem of Sappho's' (and Balmer herself is one of our best translators of Sappho's verse). At various junctures in the poem we find the classical text being destroyed by scribes who think it anti-Christian:

I had to choose which to save and which
to burn. Those that spoke of God I kept,
The rest, as ordered, went into the furnace…

…left them there for the rats to soil
Like any piece of discarded refuse…
On the shelf I replaced each space
with Paul's *Epistles,* all the *Gospels*…

Who needs poetry or philosophy
when you have faith, orthodoxy?

Achilles' homosexual love for Patroclus provides the background for grief in Balmer's poem. One has the sense that this theme of homosexuality was of current interest at the time of the play's composition (very sensitively discerned by Balmer in her poem), and was of interest to the Athenian audience for whom Aeschylus was writing, the playwright attempting to establish the proper relationship that should exist between a male lover and a male loved one. The larger motifs we associate with Aeschylean tragedy (divine dispensation, justice, the actions of ancestors, the dictates of fate, the hero's downfall) are all missing in this play (what we have left of it, that is). Balmer's intimation in the poem is that Aeschylus thought

Homer's time more open-minded than his own on such matters as homosexuality, and this point he is trying to communicate to his audience.

In Balmer's re-imagining of *Myrmidons*, Achilles' actions are more than just the manifestations of a vendetta as they are in the *Iliad* – they demonstrate a deep love for his friend Patroclus. Aeschlyus (in Balmer's figuration) is aware of Achilles' sensitivity, and it is possible that she is concentrating on the word *panaōrios* Achilles applies to himself in the Priam scene in Book XXIV of the *Iliad* – a word which suggests someone out of the ordinary, someone different, and it is possible Aeschylus thought this also defined Achilles' homosexuality, his freedom to break convention openly in line with his other actions in Homer's poem. Unlike Hector, Achilles has no family or friends near him apart from Patroclus, his fellow-warrior and bosom-friend. Achilles is an individualist in all things, a breaker of codes and traditions. Still he is an intense heterosexual lover of Briseis (how did Aeschylus deal with that in his play? is a question we can ask), a type of obdurate anti-hero who has a marked propensity for isolation. At one point in the *Iliad* Achilles wishes that he and Patroclus alone will survive the war, and that the whole of the Achaean army will perish – an extreme position, to say the least. So it is Achilles represents a heightened form of humanity, even in his homosexuality. Such a characterisation makes the warrior more human, perhaps, and again one suspects that Balmer thinks Aeschylus may have been attracted to this idea of the warrior's fallibility. The intense wailing for his friend at his funeral (in the *Iliad*) emphasises the degree of love Achilles had for his friend, the foundations of Balmer's narrative thereby founded on solid scholarly research.

Balmer, the twenty-first century poet, unearths not coins or shards but words – vestiges of an ancient culture, what she terms 'the hoard of forgotten worlds'. ('Worlds' here is deliberately close to 'words', one feels, the poet sensing that a way of life is belatedly revealed through the culture's lexis. 'Hoard' also suggests the homonym 'horde', the mass of 'barbarians' responsible for destroying cultural heritage – one has only to think of ISIS in Palmyra in this regard, with their recent depredations across the Middle East):

Where they had cruelty, we had culture.
Where they had greed, we had Greek.

The inference here is that the loss (or discovery) of one letter (either 'd' or 'k' in this case) in a text can alter meanings hugely. One thinks of Geoffrey Hill's image of 'a disciplined scholar piecing fragments together'. Throughout the course of the poem we find how responses to the broken text have changed over the millennia, annotators changing the text or corrupting it, 'sometimes unwittingly, for better, for worse, but always with passion' as the cover to the book informs us. Particularly interesting in this regard are the lines:

gilt horse-cockerel mastheads…
crafted with care, are melting, drip by drip,
in the corrosive fires of burning ships..

initially interpreted by scholars as the Athenians being drunk, until properly understood by Callimachus in the second-century BCE as the Trojans burning the Achaean warships.

Balmer has us understand how serendipitous the survival of texts is by providing a glimpse of a bureaucrat getting bored at his desk:

And find myself scribbling on the reverse
a line or two, maybe from Aeschylus;
as Achilles, war-scarred, in *Myrmidons*,
cried out at last: *We need more weapons…*

a phrase that survives on a scrap of paper recovered from the rubbish tip at Oxyryhncus two thousand years later – 'those dark words scarring the papyrus' – poetry escaping 'oblivion by a hair's breadth' as Balmer terms it.

So it is what might at first seem like an alien culture is brought back to life, resuscitated almost, to make the poetry current – the poets', scholars' and archaeologists' domains overlapping, pitching themselves against history's cruelty and contempt. The words stand out 'in luminous detail' against the darkness of the centuries, finding clarity amongst all the confusion, all the attrition of time and war. Balmer's technique (in its full sensuous life and detail) ensures that classical poetry belongs to everyone, not just professional scholars. As D.S Carne-Ross has argued persuasively: 'Ancient literature must always be re-created… The sentence, sometimes the word, has to be dissolved, atomized, and its elements then reconstituted in a new form'. This is the very method Josephine Balmer has followed imaginatively in *The Paths of Survival,* ensuring an intellectual precision and emotional breadth which stands out amongst contemporary poets:

What matters now is what survives;
what time corrodes and what it spares…
Cry for the living not for the dead
Everything we had is lost…

As outlined earlier, there is a similar tone evinced by a similar method in *Letting Go*, a sustained elegy (consisting of thirty sonnets and two poems) for the poet's mother, based on incidents (or inspired by) quotations from texts by Cavafy, Virgil, Aeschylus, Livy, Ovid, Thucydides, Homer, Hesiod, Ibycus, Plato, Heraclitus, and Pausanias – incidents that provide analogies for Balmer's grief, a resetting, or recreation, of old tales and myths. At one point in the sequence Blamer imagines herself as a belated suppliant of Aeschylus (from the play of that name) speaking 'only/in laments, the savage language of hurt,/strangeness of mourning'. The title of the collection is borrowed from Emily Dickinson's famous poem 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes':

This is the Hour of Lead –
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the
letting go –

She writes of 'Things We Leave Behind' (a translation from Cavafy), of a favourite table where she and her mother used to sit together to eat, to drink, to talk, now given to charity and rediscovered in a local café – and so it is that '*those worn-out things we leave behind*' turn out to be not so 'worn-out' after all, but live on after us as traces or vestiges. But still, grief hits hard. She realises now that her mother is 'missing' forever as she draws up a 'To-Do' list: 'Decide sandwiches for the caterers./Get order of service to the printer./Look out a photo for cover picture./Talk to the priest about bidding prayers' – a litany of actions which

she hopes will forestall her grief. She thinks of words which she could have shared with her mother, but never did, regretting those earlier 'halcyon' days:

Looking back, what hurts more than the knowing
is the not knowing. That this was the calm
before the gales and the wild, storm-blown rain –
the halcyon days that would now be mine
forever, would always carry my name.

The difference between *The Paths of Survival* and this book is that the poet is now writing of a single life-span, not of centuries or millennia, concentrating on a subjective arena of experience. What I like about Balmer's style is that she always acknowledges her sources, not hiding them, celebrating debts to others that are a consolation in her sorrow, gifts almost. Her footnotes are always serious, containing none of that silly parodying one often finds in Eliot or Geoffrey Hill, for instance.

We find the poet wondering at the incongruous delivery of a pair of gloves to her mother after her death, choosing from her mother's jewellery, feeling sorry for her father at the funeral, everyone 'benumbed, trapped. Out of reach. Ice-bound'. The inwardness of the poet's pain is partially overcome by working on that 'formal feeling' Dickinson writes about, writing these 'mourning sonnets and poems' to cope with her grief, to comprehend, to surmount the sorrow. She recalls 'that lost moment/before she [her mother] grabs her bag, locks the car door,/runs up the path to ring my bell once more', their last trip together, of 'the pact' between mother and daughter – 'the pact/of the living and the dead' – analogous to the literary history Balmer is studying. The poet feels some guilt that she has survived serious illness in a way her mother hasn't, grasping at shadows, dreaming of ghosts, this 'quagmire grief' as she calls it, dwelling on memories of phoning home from Rome and Paris stricken with homesickness, months in bed with depression, 'no pleasure in wine… hunched under the sheets as lethargy creeps,/up and on, a hard ball of crushing lead' – but knowing this will pass ('slowly, the weight will lift'), the burial, 'The soft, relentless hiss of soil on wood.'

For Balmer then '*The dead are our friends,/our colleagues, our fellow conspirators./They, too, shape our waking world.'* So it is she digs deep into literary history to make the present bearable, making what might at first sight seem archaic material come alive, straddling the centuries, making the personal and impersonal coalesce in her art. So what might have been a mere literary exercise becomes fine poetry:

In my dream you were still here, up ahead
in your best hat and coat. *It's Jo* I said
as you turned round, perplexed, testing the word
on your tongue as if one you'd never heard
but know you should remember. *Jo? Ah. Yes*.
Pale as a splintered moon scudding through clouds
we catch – or think we catch – at falling dusk,
you were frowning, flinty, a stranger cast
in Penwith granite. I woke drenched in sweat,
back from the Underworld like Aeneas
stepping out of the sedge and dank morass.
Now I saw that here was the other path
you might have taken the night you left us.

The one that would have splintered our hearts.

And so it is ‘the things we leave behind’, including poems, artefacts of memory, which commemorate those we have loved.

I recommend these two books by Josephine Balmer to all those who take an interest in both contemporary poetry and that of the past as a legacy which challenges the ravages of time and barbarism.

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