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The Library versus The Lyre: The Paths of Survival and the Poetry of Textual History

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The Library versus The Lyre: *The Paths of Survival* and the Poetry of Textual History

Josephine Balmer

Abstract

What is the relationship between poetry and scholarship? What can poetry add to the sum of knowledge that scholarship might not? Conceived as a coda to my 2013 study, *Piecing Together the Fragments: Translating Classical Verse, Creating Contemporary Poetry*, “The Library versus The Lyre” applies the same methods of critical discussion of, and commentary on, my practice as a poet and classical translator to my latest collection, *The Paths of Survival* (2017). This collection comprises a poetic sequence which moves backwards in time from the present-day to antiquity as it explores the fragility of the written word; how it is destroyed and how it can endure, often in surprising ways, against all odds. In particular, it focuses on the ten tiny scraps of Aeschylus’s play *Myrmidons* all that now remains of his tragic masterpiece written in the fifth century BCE—commencing with a tiny scrap preserved in the Sackler Library, Oxford and concluding with the Athenian tragedian himself revising his manuscript on his deathbed in Sicily in 456 BCE. Of all my collections, *The Paths of Survival* offers the most scholarly concerns, raising most questions about the correlations and disruptions between the poetic and the academic. “The Library versus The Lyre” examines this sometimes distrustful, often productive, relationship between the two fields as it looks forward to a new, mutually sympathetic synthesis. As it concludes: “...without scholarship *Myrmidons* would be lost. And without poetry it would never have been written.”

Strive to become great but don’t tread on corpses
C.P. Cavafy (Lechonitis 32)

Given a line

After a 2017 reading at the Ioannou Centre in Oxford, organised by the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (APGRD), I was asked by an academic in the audience why I had chosen to write my then new collection, *The Paths of Survival*, as poetry rather than scholarship. It was a fair point. At first glance the collection might appear to have an overtly scholarly movement, tracing the scattered fragments of Aeschylus’s lost tragedy *Myrmidons* backwards in time, from a tiny scrap preserved in the Sackler Library, Oxford, through archaeologists, scholars, editors, manuscript hunters, anthologists and scribes right back to the Athenian tragedian himself revising his manuscript on his deathbed in Sicily in 456 BCE. As my questioner pointed out, I had previously written many other

scholarly pieces. My answer was instant, instinctive: where scholarship looks to certainty, poetry can embrace ambiguity. Where scholarship deals in establishing the known, the deductive, poetry seeks to re-enact the complexity, the fluidity of moral systems and beliefs. In addition, where scholarship looks to convince, poetry prefers to stand on moving ground, undermining its own arguments, transgressing its own truths. I was reminded of the poet and translator H.D. declaring in her 1920 prose-poem “*Helios and Athene*”: “Let us terrify like Errynes [sic] the whole tribe of academic Grecians” (328).

But the more I think about this symbiotic relationship between poetry and scholarship, the more I realise how intricate and paradoxical it can be. Certainly, of all of my collections, *The Paths of Survival* had required the most initial research yet had also been the most organic, a project which evolved creatively more than any of the others throughout its writing as well as its research. So much so that it is difficult now to pinpoint its genesis. I had been planning to work on *Myrmidons* for some time. Forming the first part of Aeschylus’s lost trilogy, the *Achilleis*, the play had been notorious throughout antiquity, and beyond, for the way in which it portrayed the homoerotic relationship between the Greek warrior prince Achilles and his comrade Patroclus, an element which is not explicit in Homer’s version of the myth in the *Iliad* although, as Pantelis Michelakis points out, Aeschylus’s account soon became prevalent in fifth century Athens (47). *Myrmidons* was also renowned for its daring staging, as the sulking Achilles sits silent and veiled on the stage for much of the opening action, a feature mocked by later Athenian comic playwrights (see, for example, Aristophanes, *Frogs* 832-34, and Taplin 58ff.). Both of these ‘difficult’ elements must have contributed to the tragedy’s eventual loss from the classical canon. Here was a fragmentary drama that punched far above the weight of its forty or so surviving lines. As Tom Stoppard had A.E. Housman declare of the play in *The Invention of Love*: “I would join Sisyphus in Hades and gladly push my boulder up the slope if only, each time it rolled back down, I were given a line” (27).

Dramatic Voices

Yet initially, and for a long time into my planning for the collection, rather than retelling the long, long history of its reception and survival, I had thought that my creative explorations would be concerned with reworking the text itself. At the same time, I had also been working very tentatively on tracking the story of Ptolemy’s *Almagest*, the second-century CE astronomical treatise lost to western Europe until Arabic translations of Ptolemy’s original Greek were translated back into Latin by scholars such as Gerard of Cremona in the twelfth century, revolutionising sea navigation. Somehow, sometime, the two ideas merged (Gerard himself turns up in *The Paths of Survival* as the narrator of the poem “Gerard’s Constellations” from the “Translators” section). And when I started researching how *Myrmidons* had been fragmented—and rediscovered—over the centuries, I discovered its own

fascinating stories of loss and survival against all odds: a perhaps surprising word from *Myrmidons* contained in a manuscript discovered in a remote Greek monastery; the papyrus scrap excavated at Oxyrhynchus, and later thought destroyed in the Allied bombing of Florence before being rediscovered in a forgotten notebook transcript; a few words scrawled on the back of a legal note from third-century BCE Egypt.¹ And so the two projects coalesced. This, I realised, was my story, extending from Athens to Alexandria, Byzantium to Baghdad, Syria to Spain.² The forbidden passion of Achilles and Patroclus could still provide an emotional backdrop to this trail of discovery. At the same time, the silence of the tragedy's main protagonist, the hero who will not speak out, offered a metaphor for the lost works of antiquity.

Initially I was concerned that such seemingly arcane subject matter might never work as poetry. Instead, I toyed with the idea of a series of short fictional prose pieces in different narrative voices. But it soon became clear that, in my own case, at least, poetry could do the job better (although, by way of exception, the sequence's penultimate poem "Thread," which had begun life as verse, was later rewritten as a prose-poem). The Alexandrian poet C.P. Cavafy had long been both an influence on, and an inspiration for, my work (see Nikolaou 119-22), and, in particular, his now perhaps more neglected 'history' poems which employ the ironic dramatic voice with consummate craft. In addition, from Alfred, Lord Tennyson, through Matthew Arnold and above all Robert Browning to T.S. Eliot, dramatic monologues have long been a feature of the Anglophone poetic tradition too. And although its most well-known proponents might be male, women have often employed the genre for political purposes, giving a voice back to the silent woman of history, for example the nineteenth-century classicist and suffragist Augusta Webster's "Circe" (14-22) and "Medea in Athens" (1-13) or Amy Levy's 1881 "Xantippe" (1), written in the voice of Socrates's often vilified wife. Contemporary examples include collections such as Judith Kazantzis's *The Wicked Queen* (1980) and Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* (1999). Other women poets have explored 'cross-gendered' poetry in subversive ways, such as Elizabeth Bishop's 1971 poem "Crusoe in England" (9) or the work of Ai whose poems have included the voices of J. Edgar Hoover, James Dean and Elvis Presley (for more examples, see Parker and Willhardt). In contrast, Margaret Atwood's poem "The Loneliness of the Military Historian" inverts this device by having her protagonist speak in a perhaps surprising female voice (49). Of course, the engagement of contemporary women poets with ancient texts in new ways, such as Anne Carson's 2009 dialogue with Catullus poem 101 in *Nox* or Alice Oswald's with Homer's *Iliad* in *Memorial* (2011), were also inspiring.

But most of all I was looking to continue the work I had begun in my 2009 collection, *The Word for Sorrow*, in which many of the poems were ventriloquised through versions of Ovid's own male, first person account of

his exile in *Tristia*. These then led in to parallel pieces written in the voices of World War I soldiers at Gallipoli. On a more personal note, as I was writing *The Paths of Survival*, I was reeling from the sudden death of my mother from a heart attack and the many characters who peopled the collection provided what classicist Charles Rowan Beye has termed the discipline's "a place to hide" (154), a way to escape, at least for the time being, from the personal confessions of contemporary lyric. This is not just an issue for poets or other writers; in a recent interview with Nancy Durrant, artist Tracey Emin has revealed that her early conceptual works acted as means of "distance between herself and the subject matter" (5).

The Beginning in the end and the end in the beginning

But without any direct translation of *Myrmidons*'s erotic love story, concentrating instead on the dusty passage of its physical text, how was it going to be possible to capture the imagination of general poetry readers? This question hung over me as I started to write —and rewrite— the poems that would later constitute the sequence of *The Paths of Survival*. I began at the most furthermost point from us. "Aeschylus's Revision" sees the Athenian tragedian looking back at his life and work on his deathbed in Sicily in 456 BCE, relating its action to documented incidents in his own life. The poem was one of the first pieces for which I had made initial prose notes, and these now provided the basis for the verse version. This was nothing new; Matthew Hollis has noted how British poet Edward Thomas often used prose pieces as the basis for subsequent poems (see, for example, 169, 203-05). "Aeschylus's Revision" was then originally published in *Long Poem Magazine*.

But the challenge of finding Aeschylus's voice remained. Apart from his participation in the battles of Marathon and Salamis against the invading Persians, little is known about his life. Yet, from the start, I knew that I wanted to present a very different figure from the sombre 'father of tragedy,' often mocked so ruthlessly in Aristophanes's comedies. And then, suddenly, Aeschylus began to speak —a poet, like any other, concerned with the slipperiness of their own language:

I have been trying to find a word
for the colour of the sea; wind-stirred
for days now, storm-faded, foam-
flecked, shadowed by the span of egret
wings, nosing north, heading home.
But it would take a lifetime to capture
and, as my Syrian physician concurs,
I have only a fraction of one left.
And Greek is too vague, the language
of the colour blind. *Chloros*. We use it
both of rain-drenched summer grass
and sun-blanch'd autumn straw ("Or piss,"
as the physician notes with relish).
If we Athenians ever need to evaluate,
variegate, differentiate, we must do it
by association, metaphor, epithet -
spray-whitened, blood-raged, death-dark -

the complex adjectives my critics
have long reviled for their strangeness;
the reason, perhaps, we are at heart
a nation of politicians, tricksters, poets,
trying to catch the fleeting, the imprecise
through our tongue's own imprecision,
those dark words scarring pale papyrus
but as we write a world bursts in to light. (72)

The next poem I worked on, “Final Sentence,” was at the opposite end to “Aeschylus’s Revision,” both in time and quantity, moving from the completed tragedy to one of its last remaining tiny fragments. Initially, my first person monologue here had been written in the voice of an Oxford professor of papyrology, fascinated with a scrap of *Myrmidons* in the University’s Sackler Library. [Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 2256](#) contains nearly ninety tiny pieces of papyrus in all. Of these, number 55 constitutes five, barely legible half-lines, although part of its text could possibly be read as *kata skoton* or “into the darkness” –which could perhaps complete the lover’s lament Achilles murmurs over Patroclus’s dead body in *Myrmidons* (fragment 136). If so, it would be an example of the homoerotic passion which later rendered *Myrmidons* such a difficult and controversial work, probably sealing its demise. Whatever its provenance, these two words seemed portentous, fortuitous; a warning to us that our own cultures might be far more fragile than we think. Yet, at the same time, they still echo with Achilles’s grief at his lost lover, a grief that still resonates with us twenty-five centuries later. As I wrote about the poem on [my blog](#):

...somehow, by judgement or by error but mostly through happenstance, something of the written text, of literary culture, however damaged, however minuscule, has managed to escape all those centuries of ignorance, war, persecution and often systematic destruction. Proof that words can – and do – thrive where all else is lost.

I worked on this poem through several drafts but somehow it just did not ring true. In the end I realised that, in order to engage the reader, it required my own, personal voice. Even then, its final sonnet form did not come into focus until just before the collection’s final editing for publication. And, as such, it became the prologue or “proem” for the collection, and is worth quoting here in its entirety:

Proem: Final Sentence
(*Sackler Library, Oxford, Present Day*)

Still I am drawn to it like breath to glass.
That ache of absence, wrench of nothingness,
stark lacunae we all must someday face.

I imagine its letters freshly seared;
a scribe sighing over ebbing taper,
impatient to earn night’s coming pleasures
as light seeped out of Alexandria.

But in these hushed corners of Oxford
Library afternoons, milky with dust,
the air is weighted down by accruing loss

and this displaced scrap of frayed papyrus
whose mutilated words can just be read,
one final, half-sentence: *Into darkness...*
Prophetic. Patient. Hanging by a thread. (11)

Now the collection had a contemporary poem as well as one set in ancient Athens. I cannot remember now when the idea came to invert the time sequence and move backwards over the centuries, beginning with the surviving papyrus scrap to end with Aeschylus and his complete play. But once it arrived it seemed like it had always been there. This thematic device had been perhaps most famously employed by Martin Amis in his 1991 novel *Time's Arrow*. But it also echoed the opening and closing words of T.S. Eliot's poem "East Coker" in *Four Quartets*: "In my beginning is my end..."/ "In my end is my beginning" (13, 20). This collection had been veined through my work from 2004's *Chasing Catullus: Poems, Translations and Transgressions* onwards (see also *Piecing Together the Fragments* 194-5).

Custodians, excavators and editors

Nevertheless, filling in the gaps between these two poems seemed a particularly daunting task. Each piece, each voice, had to work as a standalone piece which should be able to speak to any reader, classicist or not (many were published individually in literary journals as they were written). But each one also had to move the story on, shift time back. In writing lyrical poetry about twenty-first century librarians, twentieth-century archaeologists, nineteenth-century editors or eighteenth-century textual scholars, it often seemed that I had set myself an impossible task. And then I came across affecting accounts of the recovery of precious manuscripts from the National Library of Iraq in Baghdad after it was set on fire by a stray incendiary bomb during the Gulf War (for example see Stuart Jeffries's [The Guardian interview](#) with Baghdad librarian Saad Eskander). In particular, art historian Zainab Bahrani's 2013 article for the US journal *Document* journal, including startling [photographs of burnt books](#) by Roger LeMoyne, inspired the poem "The Librarians' Power":

They seemed like something living:
fungus on an oak, the pleated folds
of open mushroom cup, organisms
that were once books, manuscripts,
now debris of 'precision' incendiary. (14)

Bahrani's account illustrated how the destruction of literary culture is, sadly, still relevant to us in our own century.³ "The Librarian's Power" also introduces two important strands in the book; the crucial role played by the east in preserving ancient texts, and the preservation of lines, or half-lines, from classical literary works through quotation in other, non-literary texts, often scientific or medical treatises:

Those lost worlds were retrieved
in the flash of forceps, lifting piece

on tiny piece, word on broken word.
Our own enduring, unshakeable belief
that in each newly-deciphered letter
a poem waited to be recovered. (14)

Through more online research, I also discovered the story of how, in 1959, a visiting scholar at the remote Greek Orthodox Monastery of Zavorda in Macedonia, northern Greece, discovered a new, previously unknown copy of Photius's ninth-century *Lexicon*, a treasure trove of references to classical texts. Thrillingly, this contained a reference to *Myrmidons*. As historian Roger Pearse recounts on his [blog](#), although the thirteenth or fourteenth-century Zavorda manuscript is later than others, such as the twelfth-century *Codex Galeanus*, it is the only complete surviving manuscript of the text, containing additional pages and entries absent from other editions. These include the Greek word *abdeluktos* which Photius tells us means "without stain" or "absolved of blame" (*Lexicon* a.33) and, unlike other, later sources, notes that it originates from a line from *Myrmidons* (fragment 137). This line almost certainly derives from a scene at the end of the play as the Greek hero Achilles embraces the corpse of his slain lover Patroclus, exclaiming that such an act is not an abomination "because I love him." The poem "Trespass" explores this discovery but is voiced not by scholars but an imaginary monk who realises that, for centuries, the monastery had been an unwitting custodian of such a passionate, forbidden love:

In its shadow we had held sacred homily,
called our brethren to vespers, benediction.
Now it was unleashed again, this heresy
we had guarded here without knowing
for so long. Unspeakable acts. Trespass. (15)

And so scholarship and research brought their own rewards. Now I had my first section, "Custodians." The next section, "Excavators," centred around the Italian dig at Oxyrhynchus in the 1930s during which new papyri fragments of *Myrmidons* were unearthed, which were later brought back to the Institute of Papyrology at Florence. As mentioned [above](#), one of these was later believed to have been lost in an Allied bombing raid on Florence in 1944, although a transcript was later found in 1953 in a forgotten notebook. The complexity of events here almost led me to abandon my framing strategy of reverse chronology, if only for this section. But in the end I decided that each individual poem could lead the reader back, even if, at first, they might not be sure of the entire narrative arc until the section's end. And here, again, more online investigations provided inspirations for each piece. For instance, [an aerial photograph](#) of a bomb dropping on Florence, found on Pinterest, led to the sonnet "Itch," told from the viewpoint of the pilot watching his bomb fall on the city: "For a moment I thought of my baby son/As smoke spiralled up like umbilical cord" (21).

The more I continued, the more I realised the importance of moving outwards from the small life stories of my narrators to the wider historical events they had witnessed. In poems like "The Professor's Prize" (19-20) and

“The Student’s Find” (22-23), I placed my narrators not just at the centre of the recovery of *Myrmidons* but also of European history. So, in the latter, my gay student archaeologist is hiding away in Egypt from the Italian fascist regime when his discovery of a *Myrmidons* fragment (132b) leads him to: “A point of no return. The moment/All the lies might start to shatter” (23). Poignantly, in “The Professor’s Prize,” the reader has already learned of his subsequent lynching by a homophobic mob. Such devices not only linked the stories of the narrators to that of the play itself but also helped to provide a universal setting for the poem’s often unknown or fictional characters.

This was particularly the case for the seemingly dour eighteenth and nineteenth-century classicists whose stories constitute the “Editors” section of the volume. In the 1830s John Anthony Cramer, an Oxford academic and cleric, collected together works from the French National Library for his *Anecdota Graeca*. These included the same, clearly homoerotic, line from *Myrmidons* later seen in the Zavorda manuscript of Photius’s *Lexicon*, although Cramer does not cite its original source or author (iv.85.23). In “Redaction,” I imagine Cramer working in the Paris Library during what was a time of radical uprising in the city and its brutal suppression. And as he does so, the unrest on the streets outside echoes his own turmoil at his discovery:

Yet even here I was no longer safe.
As the hiss and boom of gunfire ceased,
I turned a leaf, easing out the crease,
leaning on my elbows for weight;
an old manuscript, deep in the collection,
a work I should never have breached:
I am absolved because I loved him -
a reference, if I was not much mistaken,
to the unspeakable vice of the Greeks.
In Aeschylus! I copied author and play
then scratched them out. Better not to say. (26)

Throughout all these reimaginings of the past for *The Paths of Survival*, the research and historical accuracy of the scholar were important but so were the creative, fictional leaps of the poet. Did the monks of Zavorda know what they were guarding? Unlikely. Did Cramer strike out Aeschylus’s name in horror? Probably not. But these voices –and their dilemmas– could provide dramatic tension for my new narratives.

Subverting and perverting the narrative

I was also discovering how ambiguous –and subversive– a poetic voice could become. In the section “Translators” –a task close to my own heart– I took the opportunity to promote the art of my narrators’ calling. “Gerard’s Constellations” (on which see also above) concerns Gerard of Cremona, the most famous scholar of the medieval Toledo school, and explains how he approached the Arabic scientific texts he translated into Latin:

So I translated them, last in a chain –
Greek to Arabic and now my Latin –
striving to be faithful yet make them sing. (34)

“Hunayn’s Gold” celebrates the equally renowned ninth-century Arab Christian scholar, head of the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, who had first translated those Greek works into Arabic, and whose methodology of ‘sense-for-sense’ rather than ‘word-for-word’ was apparently both culturally and commercially astute, as he was paid in gold by weight of his pages. The poem is articulated through the voice of Hunayn’s physician enemies, jealous of his influence and wealth, and angry that he is disseminating the medical wisdom they see as their own property:

We watch him as he caresses his works,
balancing up their worth, word by word.
But he needs to remember his position;
he is a mere translator, not a physician -
a sword smith does not wield the sword.
He must heed the proverb of the Greeks:
*the weapons by which we are vanquished
come not from others but our own wings.*
Yes, Hunayn should take care. His inks,
like gold, are precious, envied, dangerous.
So we have denounced him to the Caliph. (35)

In the poem, *Myrmidons* fragment 139, later quoted by the medical writer Galen (*On the Doctrines* 4.5.17), is ironically contained within the vicious jibes of Hunayn’s enemies. They also voice commonplace misconceptions about the translator’s role, which are here undermined by being articulated by such unreliable narrators —a sweet revenge for translators everywhere, at any time.

In the previous section, “Scavengers,” “The Clerk’s Crusade” is set during the so-called Fourth Crusade, which pitted Christian against Christian, when mutinous forces from the western or Latin church turned their attention to the eastern city of Constantinople, drawn, in part, by the booty to be looted from its famous riches. As vivid eyewitness accounts describe (for example, Nicetas Choniates, *Historia* 587) for three days in April 1204, the Latins looted the city, destroying its Library and melting down its golden treasures to cart away. The poem offers one explanation for how Photius’s *Lexicon* might have ended up in the library of a Greek monastery, taken to such safe places following political and religious upheavals in the east. But its unassuming clerk-narrator also questions the actions of the western or Latin church:

Myself, I looted what they overlooked.

As Latin bishops stripped our churches
of jewels, I stuffed my splattered jerkin
with a few foxed and battered books:
Photius’ *Lexicon*, Lucian, Athenaeus.
Here was no Holy War but Christian
against Christian, West against East.
Better the Saracens. They had belief...

...Our nobles crept away like thieves
as the Latins jeered, waving inkpots,
quills – the weapons not of warriors

but meek scholars, they hissed.

Let them mock.

Where they had cruelty, we had culture.
Where they had greed, we had Greek. (31-32)

The clerk's mention of Photius's *Lexicon* in the poem not only takes us back to the monks of Macedonia and "Trespass" but also presages a later poem, "Gloss," from the section, "Victors." Photius I (later St Photius the Great) was himself originally a secular clerk who was appointed Patriarch (or Pope) of Byzantium in 858 CE following a time of often bloody religious schism in the city between the iconoclasts, who wanted to destroy images of God as idolatrous, and the orthodox church, which viewed such depictions as holy relics. In 868 Photius was temporarily unseated but returned to the patriarchal throne in 877. Hostile sources, such as Nicetas the Paphlagonian, recount that his treatment of his enemies was harsh, as was his later persecution of the city's Jewish community (Angold 132). Yet he was also renowned for his learning, revered as a cultured man whose classical scholarship was second to none. His *Lexicon*, probably written in his youth and revised later, contains many rare Greek words and their usage. As "Trespass" had explored, one of these was the adjective *abdeluktos* which, as we have seen, was originally used in *Myrmidons* to mean something like "absolved of blame." In recording it, and the line in *Myrmidons* from which it originates (fragment 137), this uncompromising Church father preserved perhaps one of the most controversial scraps of Aeschylus's tragedy for the future. Michael Angold notes that Photius was perhaps able to marry his classicism with his ecclesiastical conservation by considering that "the true purpose of a classical education" was to equip men "to deal with the intellectual difficulties presented by Christianity" (128). In "Gloss," his definition of *abdeluktos* serves as a way to underscore not just the power of language but its ambiguity. Scholars, poets, as well as general readers, all rely on lexicons and dictionaries, regarding them as monolithic, oracular, definitive truth. But, definitions can be shifting, fluid and, as I discover each day when setting word puzzles for *The Times*, often contradictory, depending on which dictionary or lexicon you are using. And they can be perverted, reading by reading:

Now terms were defined in my *Lexicon*.
I started with alpha: **Abdeluktos**.
Above blame. Any heretics tortured,
maimed. *Absent of guilt*. All Jews slaughtered.
[ə'b'del'ok'tos]. A sword hissing through bone.
Absolved. Assaults washed clean by each fresh gloss. (38)

Here scholarship is not just difficult but deadly. As in "Dictionary Definitions" from my 2009 collection *The Word for Sorrow* (31; see also *Piecing Together the Fragments* 222-23), "Gloss" draws on the typography of dictionaries, the

mechanics of research. At the same time, the creative work goes far beyond the scholarly, mirroring the latter's tools as it repurposes them. This serves to subvert not just the authority of the dictionary's definitions but also our own relationship with them. So the poem is both dependent on researching the lost pages of Photius's *Lexicon* —no easy task, as Roger Pearse had outlined—but also becomes its own metatext, a commentary on our readings of such works.

The second poem in the “Victors” section concerns the Arabic conquest of Alexandria by Amr ibn al-Asi in 646 CE, seen by many hostile Christian sources as the final point in the long story of Greek culture in Alexandria. One story, often attributed to Bar-Hebraeus's thirteenth-century *History of the Dynasties*,⁴ recounts how Amr destroyed all the works in the Library of Alexandria on the orders of his Caliph, Omar, sending them to be burnt in the city's bath-house furnaces. But, like Photius, Amr was also known as a poet and scholar, revered for his wisdom, and it is possible that, by his conquest, most of the Library's contents would already have been long lost. As Justin Pollard and Howard Reid comment, the origin of the story is uncertain, pointing out that, ironically, at the same time as Bar-Hebraeus was writing, “it was Muslim scholars who were even then preserving and translating the few great works from Alexandria's Library that had survived” (287).

Yet the myth has persisted. And as Pollard and Reid concede, it powerfully demonstrates that “any conqueror might consider the contents of a library as dangerous as the contents of an arsenal” (2006: 287). In “Amr's Last Words,” I wanted to take as my starting point Amr's beautiful and affecting response, quoted both by E. M. Forster in his guide to Alexandria (62-63) and later by Lawrence Durrell in his novel *Justine* from his *Alexandrian Quartet*, when asked how an intelligent man felt at the point of his death: “I feel as if the heaven lay close upon the earth and I between the two, breathing through the eye of a needle” (77). The poem also uses Amr's own description of the city he had conquered (quoted in translation by Butler, 368). Even so, my narrator is far more nuanced and regretful about his actions than the Amr of the chroniclers:

I remembered Alexandria, possessing
a city of 4,000 palaces & 4,000 baths,
400 marble theatres, 200 greengrocers
& 1 Library. They said the Ptolemies
filled its shelves with borrowed books,
confiscated 'tax' from anchored ships,
instructing their scribes to copy works
in secret, returning only the duplicates.
Later I chose which to save and which
to burn; those that spoke of God I kept,
the rest, as ordered, went in the furnace.

The tragedies of the Greeks were first.
I can hear the crack of curled papyrus,
still smell that acrid, smouldering ash.

You ask what death tastes like. It is this. (39)

Back to classics

Amr's words take us back to the classical era and the Ptolemies (I will return to them again below). And here, in particular, it became simpler –and more important– to thread reoccurring themes and figures throughout the poems. The first classical section, “Believers,” reveals how the Alexandrian Greeks themselves could wreak as much damage on the written word as any Arab conqueror. Its first poem, “The Christians’ Cheek,” is set during the Christian riots of 391 CE in Alexandria. After pagan rites, such as animal sacrifice, were finally outlawed by the Christian emperor Theodosius, an angry mob of Christians are said to have taken the opportunity to attack a group of pagans who had taken refuge in the city’s Serapeum, a Greek temple and offshoot of the Great Library of Alexander (Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 5. 16). It is alleged they then destroyed many of the Library’s precious works:

For we are so tired of turning
the other cheek; time to shed ink,
shred parchment. It’s a while since
we’ve put a knife to fine calf-skin. (42)

“The Pagan’s Tip” gives the other side of the story. In the poem, a previously pagan family from Oxyrhynchus decide that, in a changing world, they need to ally themselves with the orthodox Christian church. The poem’s everyman narrator provides one explanation as to how all those great works of literature might have ended up on the rubbish dumps of the city, linking us back to the twentieth-century Italian archaeologists of “The Student’s Find,” as well as the opening papyrus scrap of “Final Sentence”:

That night I gathered up the volumes
my family had prized over the years:
philosophy, poetry, the great dramas
of Aeschylus, epigrams of Palladas –
texts our ancestor had brought home
in triumph from a trip to Alexandria.

Those pages hold our history like maps.
If I run my fingers over the covers,
their gold letters and tooled leather,
I can trace the twisted paths of our past.
This is who we were and what we are:
grammarians, clerks, petty bureaucrats.

On the shelf I replaced each space
with Paul’s *Epistles*, all the *Gospels*.
Ours I took out beyond the walls
among the flies and rotting waste,
left them there for the rats to soil
like any piece of discarded refuse.

Do the same, if you want my advice. (43)

Both poems turn on their titles’ pun. Both look towards the other in a final death stare as culture, scholarship, breaks down in to savagery and self-protection. In a later section “Scribe,” the poem “Blot” introduces another

piece of the mosaic, another voice; the (fictitious) cantankerous scribe who had copied the Oxyrhynchus family's prized text of Aeschylus two centuries earlier, even then perceived as a difficult and increasingly obscure text. Now culture and learning have become a mark of social-climbing as the scribe suspects that his customers will never read Aeschylus's tragedies, looking instead to impress their friends and neighbours with their highbrow taste. And yet, as he proceeds with his work, he finds echoes of his own sorrow in the tragedy:

And then today, a buyer for my script -
some pompous provincial bureaucrat
up from Oxyrhynchus with cold, hard cash
(although he couldn't tell drama from dog shit
all he cares is how it looks on the shelf).

For him I etch these words of love and grief.
I think of my wife, dead after a few weeks;
there had been a baby, some complication,
the pockmarked physician couldn't tell which -
I came back one night and she was gone.

Into darkness... The skin I, too, must live in.
Mistakes uncorrected, holding the blame.

The only words left now to mask the pain. (54)

So my fictional scribe writes the same words on the very same papyrus that will later find its way, in tattered pieces, to the Sackler Library in Oxford. In this way, "Blot" takes us back, full circle, to the collection's opening poem, "Final Sentence."

"The Ferryman's Roll," set in Alexandria some centuries before "Blot," also links us back to a previous poem, here "Amr's Last Words," and the story it references of the Ptolemaic founding of the Library. Many sources recount how Ptolemy III (246-22 BCE) decreed that all works found on boats in the city's harbour would be borrowed for copying, after which the original manuscripts would be returned intact (see, for example, Galen, 17a. 605). But when Athens lent him their great tragedies Ptolemy broke his promise and retained the originals, returning the copies instead. The poem is written in Seamus Heaney's 'sonnet and a half' form of twenty-one lines, and offers a monologue by a fictional character, an Alexandrian boatman, Charon, who shares the name of the mythical ferryman of the dead in Hades (although Callimachus the librarian and famed poet, is an historical figure). It describes a crucial moment in the transmission –and loss– of the text, at the same time providing a narrative context for modern readers:

Last week I took some rolls of Aeschylus
to Callimachus, our famed Librarian:
gilt horse-cockerel mastheads, we read, perplexed,
crafted with care, are melting, drip by drip,
in the corrosive fires of burning ships...
We joked how they must drink, these Athenians.

Callimachus did not laugh. It was fate
he said: here were the Greek prows at Troy, torched
as Achilles sulked. *Myrmidons*. Lines thought
so precious that he would not give them back.
We all groaned, aghast. Not more horse-cocks.

And then I glanced at Callimachus's face
caught in a shifting taper as he talked -
like a city put to flame, molten wax
about to twist the world into new shapes. (60)

Like many of the other poems in *The Paths of Survival*, “The Ferryman’s Roll” embeds a fragment of *Myrmidons* within it, here fragment 134, which is perhaps one of its most challenging. Shortly after Aeschylus’s death, the comic playwright Aristophanes quoted the fragment as an example of the tragedian’s incomprehensible verse, although ironically, Aristophanes’s scathing reference would be the only way in which the lines would survive. In particular, Aristophanes joked about the *hippalektron* or ‘horse-cockerel’ mentioned in the fragment, a beast from Greek mythology with a horse’s head and cock’s tail. This, as Aristophanes has Aeschylus himself explain in *Frogs* (934), apparently refers to the wooden masthead of a Greek warship burnt by the Trojans. Clearly, even to the ancients, these were difficult and impenetrable lines. But viewing them through Charon’s narrative enabled me to underscore not just the fragment’s literal meaning but also the complexity of its reception, even within the ancient world. In this way, the confusion (and also wonder) of the fictional characters reflects our own. At the same time, the alluring opaqueness of the fragment, and its integrity, could be maintained.

Playing with the text

Such strategies are nothing new. In C.P. Cavafy’s well-known 1898 poem “Waiting for the Barbarians,” the reader views the offstage action through the questioning dialogue of the poem’s men-in-the-street protagonists, leading to their verbalisation of the poet’s own realisation that “those people were some sort of a solution” (14-17). As Edmund Keeley notes of Cavafy’s later historical poetry, his mode in these works is always “to select and highlight” narratives that are both true to his view of the historical moment and relevant to “the particular ideology...he wishes to project” (99). In “Waiting for the Barbarians” Cavafy’s setting is left vague, unnamed. My narrations in *The Paths of Survival* were, of necessity, more precise; the story of Aeschylus’s text had to be followed accurately, and any ‘ideological’ purpose confined to predetermined events, although clearly it was also possible to select which to highlight and which to ignore. “Sarpedon’s Version” and “Aeschylus’s Desk,” the paired poems which form the “Copyists” section towards the end of the collection (although both were in fact written early on in the production of the collection), articulate two such historical events; the copying of definitive versions of all Greek tragedies, including those of Aeschylus, in c.340 BCE on the orders of the Athenian magistrate Lycurgus, and the purchase in c.370 BCE of Aeschylus’s supposed ‘desk’ by the poetically-inclined yet ruthless tyrant of Syracuse, Dionysius the Elder. The poems are narrated by each of a pair of doomed lovers, ruined by their own self-deceit as well as the cruelty of others. “Sarpedon’s Version,” in particular, leads us back to “Blot” and “Final

Sentence,” as it concludes by quoting [Oxyrhynchus fragment 2256](#): “*Soon I will follow you into darkness...*”. For Paschalis Nikolaou, who translated them into Greek for *Frear* magazine, these poems, while recognisably my work, were perhaps also those most indebted to Cavafy, offering “marginal actors in unforgiving historical scenes” (121).

As the writing process developed, Cavafy’s shade might still have hovered over the work – a daunting yet encouraging figure, as he illuminated the way through – but my poems also began to find their own dynamics. From the start I had decided that, despite the many different voices of the poems, I wanted to keep a unity of tone throughout. My main reason here was the fact that, apart from my own voice in the opening poem, only one of the speakers in the collection is clearly identified as a woman, the extraordinary 1930s Italian papyrologist Medea Norsa in “The Professor’s Prize.” Given the subject matter – and male fields it addresses, such as papyrology or textual editing – this is hardly surprising. Nevertheless, I was still writing a feminised text, viewed through the lens of a woman’s consciousness, that of its writer. And so, rather than trying to present a crude impersonation of each character, each voice became merged with my own, transforming male history. For instance, the last two lines of “The Clerk’s Crusade,” quoted above, echo not only my own longing to learn Greek as a woman, but the long, long struggle of all women to gain access to the language (see Prins). In “Blot,” the poem’s standalone final line also acts as my own authorial comment on the previous stanzas. Here, the grumpy scribe’s emotional response to personal tragedy is my own contemporary, feminising addition. And so, as in my earlier versions of Ovid’s exile poetry for *The Word for Sorrow*, the male voice is transgressed.

In addition, as we have seen above with the poem “Gloss”, the collection offered many other opportunities to play with the (mostly male) conventions of textual history. “Margin” is written in the voice of Didymus ‘Chalcenterus’ (or ‘iron-stomached,’ so named for his ability to consume textual references), an obscure commentator, from the first century CE. The poem’s layout ironically mimics that of a Scholiast’s marginalia, in small font justified to the right of the page:

In this line of work
you have to make
things small, short.
So I digest the refs,
pin down each taut
twist of grammar
or some rare idiom,
poetry’s last crumbs -
swallow them whole
(it’s not for nothing
I’m called ‘Iron-guts’)
then spit them all out.
Well, all except jokes... (56)

Further on, “Diple” is an exploration of Julius Caesar’s supposed burning of the Alexandrian library while besieged in the city during the Civil Wars of 48/7 BCE (Plutarch, *Life of Julius Caesar* 49.6). The poem uses as its

central image the textual symbol with which scholars marked a point of interest in a text, here providing both a physical and metaphorical context:

We watched the sails, huge white sparks
drifting slowly across from harbour to docks -

God-sized charcloth to catch the stores
of copied books, our whole world in draft,

stack on stack, waiting to be sent back.
And then the Library, illuminating the dark.

In the morning we found a smouldering gap.
The space where I could make my own mark. (58)

Finally here, the poem “Reverse” concerns the historical figure Zenon, a bureaucrat of Upper Egypt under the Ptolemies, whose archive of more than 2,000 fragments of administrative papers has been unearthed at Oxyrhynchus. One of these (P.Cair. Zen. 4 59651) appears to contain a snatch of a line by Aeschylus, possibly from *Myrmidons* (see Morgan 113, Pestman 189). By chance, the content of the fragment (“weapons, we need new weapons”) could, in English, semantically echo its textual location –on the back or ‘reverse,’ of Zenon’s note. I was also fascinated by the information about Zenon’s own material and cultural aspirations gleaned from other pieces of his paperwork. And so I found a tale of provincial frustration and thwarted ambition:

Sometimes now as I tally up my takings,
the stars scratched on unrolling horizons,
numberless, through skies like torn papyrus,
I dream of Greece, Mysia’s cool streams.
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 new weapons.* (61)

Framing the journey

After completing the poems themselves, one of the most difficult issues, as ever, was their framing within the volume. As mentioned above, it was important that each one should be able to stand on its own, as well as provide a staging post in the backwards progression of the narrative. But the most important consideration was how best to enable the reader to approach what might otherwise have appeared to be difficult or complex material. The first decision I made was to separate the sequence into sections, with each title signalling what to expect. I also decided to intersperse the surviving fragments of *Myrmidons* between each section, carefully choosing those that might best complement the ensuing poems. The collection then ends with a translation of the reconstructed, surviving text of the play itself, a device many critics found particularly affecting.

But unlike previous collections, I decided against an explanatory introduction. I have recorded previously how some critics reacted negatively to this addition in *The Word for Sorrow*, in particular (see

Piecing Together the Fragments 226-27), as if, one complained, I “was submitting a thesis for peer review” (Bingham 30). This in itself would not have acted as a deterrent but I knew that for this volume I wanted to do something different. For a long while I included an opening sonnet, “Abstract,” which laid out the premise of the volume in verse, almost exactly as if a proposed scholarly paper. But in the end it did not make the final cut, especially as it seemed that the thrust of *The Paths of Survival* could be covered adequately in its cover blurb, highlighting the universality of the loss of the written word in any culture, at any time. Subsequently I also found that, in the writing of each poem, it became an important factor that I should assume no other detailed explanations would be available for readers at the time of publication. However, as in *Chasing Catullus*, I did still include brief end notes for each poem, mainly to acknowledge source material, as well as to provide basic historical background for often obscure incidents and characters that readers of the poems might wish to reference (see *Piecing Together the Fragments* 197-99). In addition, throughout the writing process, I established a blog, also called [The Paths of Survival](#) and subtitled ‘the poetry of history.’ Initially I saw this as a means to create a journal of a work-in-progress, posting poems as I wrote them. But I soon realised that the strictures of contemporary poetry publishing meant that this idea had to be abandoned; literary journals, both print and online, will not accept poems that have already appeared on a website published on the internet, even on the poet’s own blog. And so this became a way to offer additional material about the poems after they had been published in book form.

Aeschylus restored

With such unusual and often obscure source material, I was nervous of the reaction to the published collection –or, more to the point, lack of it, imagining that it might well struggle to attract any attention, perceived instead as an academic curiosity. So there was a huge sigh of relief when critics and readers responded positively, finding the universality within the sequence I had hoped and prayed they might (a summary can be found on my [blog](#)). But I was particularly thrilled with the judgement of poet and critic Liam Guilar in his [online review](#) that: “You could give *The Paths of Survival* to any intelligent reader, to someone who doesn't normally bother with poetry, and they would enjoy it...” Similarly, a postgraduate student writing in the [Dundee University Review of the Arts](#) (DURA), confessed: “I must admit, prior to reading this collection, I had never heard of Aeschylus or his controversial play, but I found myself consumed...” I could not have asked for more.

Other, academic commentators highlighted *The Paths of Survival*’s marriage of scholarship and poetry. In his [review](#), Vassilis Lambropoulos, C.P. Cavafy Professor Emeritus of Classical Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, found the collection

offered a rare “theory-in-verse of classical (and literary in general) reception...neither mere reception nor mere theory but a poetic theorization of what goes under ‘classical reception’ in both scholarship and translation.” Fortunately, the academic Grecians were not terrified after all, as H.D. had wished. Instead, this is a place where the scholarly and the creative might co-exist peacefully, each one reflecting –and supporting– the other. For without scholarship *Myrmidons* would be lost. And without poetry it would never have been written. In the end, what both fields seek above all else is the preservation of literary culture, of the written word. As the tragedian reflects in the final lines of “Aeschylus’s Revision”:

...now I must emend, I must speak out,
acknowledge to myself, to the living
and to the dead, if they still care or listen:
my love, remember all the nights we shared.
What matters now is what survives;
what time corrodes and what it spares. (77)

¹ For a recent text of the surviving fragments see Sommerstein.

² For more on post-classical centres of knowledge see Moller.

³ An online account of the article in *The Huffington Post* can be found [here](#).

⁴ For a full account of the difficulties of the sources see Roger Pearse’s [blog](#).

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