



How I Write

Cliff Forshaw

A LOT OF MY POETRY involves translation or transformation in one form or another. At the most basic, this is moving an idea from one place to another. These places could be languages, times or voice. I'm less interested in expressing my 'self' than working through a 'persona', which is literally a 'mask', something to 'per sonare', to 'sound through'. Currently I'm working on 'versions and perversions' of French nineteenth and early-twentieth-century poems. I think of these as 'cover versions', often with two or three versions of, or attempts at, the original. They're a *species* of 'translation' in that I've often not only transferred them from French to English, but to a different historical and cultural context.

A few years ago, I came across an article about extreme bodily modification, focussing on 'Enigma', who had had coral horns implanted in his skull; various other members of a 'gross-out' travelling circus; and Kevin Warwick, a professor of Cybernetics who has had various silicon-chip implants allowing him to communicate with a computer programmed to respond to his actions. He was also able to access sensations from his wife via a second implant connected to her nervous system. I had been reading Ovid, and this seemed a way of tackling *Metamorphoses*.

Ovid's first transformation involves his title: the Greek work for 'transformations', *metamorphoses*, itself mutates into 'mutatas formas' (changed forms) in the poem's first line, with the word for 'form', *morphe*, morphing into a near-anagram in the Latin 'forma'. ['In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora' — 'I want to talk about bodies changed



into new forms’]. Greek echoes behind the Latin. ‘Translation’, from *translatus*, is the past participle of *transfero*, ‘I transfer’. The Greek word *metaphora* does something similar. In modern Athens the word also means a removal van.

This impetus to make Ovid ‘new’ resulted in my collection *Trans*, various narratives of bodily modification, from sex changes to the extreme body artist Orlan, who through plastic surgery recreates herself as mythic figures such as Venus, as represented through Renaissance art. This sort of ‘translation’ is a large part of how I write, echoing other times, places people, cultures and environments. The raw material could come from France, Australia, Central Europe or Russia, at any point in the past from prehistoric times to speculative futures.

I rarely write one-off poems. My natural medium is a longer form: a sonnet sequence, a narrative poem, probably moving in and out of different metres and stanza patterns, often incorporating ballads, blank verse and shifting historical perspectives. Much of the work is trying to connect passages, cutting too-obvious shifts and oiling grinding gears. My latest project is a long narrative poem about Rimbaud, after he gave up poetry and became a trader and gun-runner in Africa. The sequence ends with Rimbaud’s letters home turned into verse.

A poem sequence is rather like writing a novel. The problem is keeping the momentum. Knowing what needs to be said, or hinted at, and in what order. Writing like this means I can put in a solid day’s, week’s or month’s work just getting the mechanics right. Work tends to follow a two-day pattern. I spend a day working at a particular problem, but don’t seem to get very far. The next day, this usually resolves itself and the writing goes smoothly. Next day I’m back to a problem. Sometimes this bipolar creativity has weekly swings. If the difficult period lasts for longer than a few days, I just put that project aside for as long as it takes, and work on something else. There is *always* something else in the notepads.