

Anna Jackson is a New Zealand poet whose six collections include *Catullus for Children* (2003) and *I, Clodia* (2014). She has an article, ‘Catullus in the Playground’ in *Living Classics*, ed. Stephen Harrison (OUP, 2009) and two articles on writing in response to the Classics coming out in 2017, ‘Clodia through the looking-glass,’ in *Antipodean Antiquities* (Bloomsbury) and ‘*I, Clodia: I had a dream I was a ghost*’ in *From Athens to Aotearoa* (Victoria University Press). An Associate Professor in English at Victoria University of Wellington, she has published several academic books on topics ranging from Children’s Gothic to Verse Biography.

Maxine Lewis. When did you first start thinking about using Catullus as a source of inspiration?

Anna Jackson. It was a direct response to picking up a book *Catullus in English*, the Penguin collection of translations of Catullus, from the new books stand at the Auckland University library. The collection brings together different translations by many different translators, and reading the range of translations and the range of voices, I wanted to add mine. The idea of writing *Catullus for Children* specifically came from reading the Stevie Smith translation or even seeing her name on the contents page and being so surprised at the thought of a Catullus poem by Stevie Smith. It seemed such a different voice, that naïve, childlike voice, and wondering how you would write a childlike version of Catullus and then reading her poem, it was a Stevie Smith voice but it wasn’t childlike at all. It was so middle-aged and dispirited. So I was left with the question: could you rewrite the Catullus poems in the voice of a child?

ML. So it sounds to me like you were drawn to the reception of Catullus in a way more than just Catullus.

AJ: It was the reception rather than Catullus. I didn’t come to Catullus as a Latin student of Catullus. Originally [for *Catullus for Children*] I came with an interest in reception and translation and different kind of games that people could play with Catullus. But *I, Clodia* was a very different project. What returned me to Catullus was the aspect of narrative and dialogue, which isn’t at all what you get when you’re reading a collection of translations from a lot of different translators. But because I was reading Catullus, you can’t help reading for the narrative and the dialogue and getting a much fuller sense of Catullus as a poet – so then that became what I wanted to respond to.

ML: *Catullus in English* gives a number of different versions of the same poem. So you’re getting repeated snapshots of something which is quite different from reading Catullus where it’s this ongoing sequence.

AJ: And you get such different versions, so you have the Renaissance versions that are so different from the versions from the 1970s.

ML: I'm curious about how you think of what you do, so I wondered if we could talk about terms. I know you've read a lot of scholarship on Classical Reception and that you situate yourself in that field. Do you think of yourself as 'using Catullus' or 'engaging with Catullus' or 'adapting' or 'responding to'? How do you articulate it to yourself?

AJ: Again, I guess they're such different projects that...*Catullus for Children* seems like a much more whimsical and unscholarly project than the Clodia book which was very researched and much more a response to Catullus. But in terms of reception theory it's much easier to talk about what I'm doing in *Catullus for Children*. It fits with discussions of translation in terms of domestication and foreignisation and reception theory, talking about reading always from the place and the time that you're in. And so the Clodia project in the context of reception theory begins to look like the more naïve project.

ML: You've talked about having read C. K. Stead's Catullus and also Stevie Smith's and I'm sure that you know that Catullus has been the subject for other poets and novelists, with Celia and Louis Zukofsky's Catullus translations and Thornton Wilder's *The Ides of March*...

AJ: I haven't read the novelisations, I've only read one. I read Helen Dunmore's *Counting the Stars*, which I really hated. Obviously I didn't like the portrait of Clodia, but also, I always feel very uncomfortable with that kind of biofiction. I'm treading perilously close to writing biofiction myself and it's something that I've been thinking about lately because I have begun writing about verse biography as a genre. What's the difference between biographical narratives in poetry and novelisations? Why don't I think of verse biography as biofiction? Especially since with biofiction, it's the interiority that's the problem for me, and yet interiority is so important to verse biography. I don't feel it's allowed in biofiction! It's like when we read an actual biography and there's too much of what the biographical subject was supposedly thinking, even if in a biography they have to keep saying, "would no doubt have thought" or "may have been wondering" or "was probably feeling." But in biofiction you are just being told what someone thought and I can't believe it.

ML: I hadn't thought of the *I, Clodia* poems in those terms before, but you're right, it is close to that.

AJ: It is, in fact, what it's doing!

ML: It tells you what Clodia is thinking and I think it does it really nicely.

AJ: It tells you what she was *writing*. And it doesn't tell you what Catullus is thinking. Of course Clodia Metelli was a real historical person, so I am really treading on very similar territory. I wouldn't have wanted to write poetry in the voice of Catullus, I mean I couldn't! He'd already written the poems. So how could I have written them? But the novelist isn't writing the poems Catullus has written, but is filling in the thoughts behind the poems. I don't want to know the thoughts behind the poems, the poems *are* thoughts.

ML: Part of the reason why for me *I, Clodia* works is that you are filling in a gap, and the gap is: what would Clodia have said? What would she have thought? How would she have responded to that poem or this poem or what was she doing? Those kinds of questions. But your poems still don't form a complete kind of account, maybe because your Clodia herself is ... sly is not quite the right word but I feel as if she's a bit slippery, she's not aiming to give Catullus the full picture.

AJ: I think so, she's guarded. There's a game that they're playing, and they both have to hold things back.

ML: So we read along and we're witnessing this kind of game which has strategies that we're not seeing all of. There are pieces that we're not quite sure how they're at play. So I don't feel that it aims to give too much away. And that's one of the reasons, similarly, that I really like *The Ides of March*, Thornton Wilder's novel, because it...

AJ: That's in pieces, isn't it?

ML: Yes, it's in sources.

AJ: I think I would quite like to read it now. I just wanted to be reading real sources, or I'd forget which was which.

ML: And it's from lots of different viewpoints. So it has Cicero writing to Atticus or Cicero writing to Cornelius or Cornelius writing... And it's a combination of real sources and interpolated sources so I guess in that sense it's like the *I, Clodia*. Because, poem 64 is real, but Clodia's Medea and Jason poem is imagined.

AJ: *I, Clodia* was going to be much more piecemeal originally, the original plan for it wasn't to construct such a coherent narrative. It was just to work with the Catullus poems in the order in which we have them in the Catullus books. It was meant to be up to the reader to piece together some kind of a story, just as so many readers of Catullus have wanted to do.

ML: Do you actively seek out other people's versions of Catullus or do you happen upon them without really pursuing them? Have you read Anne Carson's *Nox* or Tiffany Atkinson's *Catulla et al*?

AJ: I was interested to see what other people were doing. I love *Nox*! And I was already working on *I, Clodia* when Tiffany Atkinson's *Catulla et al* came out so I read it feeling very threatened! I didn't want anyone else to write my book. I'd always felt someone was going to write *I, Clodia* before I did because it was just a book waiting to be written. So I read *Catulla et al* terribly warily. But what she's doing is so different. I just enjoyed it, I thought it was brilliant on its own terms, very much a Catullus for the twenty-first century, if you think of

what post-modernism gives us with fluid identities and group identities and multiple voices. This is such an aspect of Catullus, the community that's built up that you feel reading these poems. They're written for readers who know each other and know who the poems are about. They're social events. And in the age of social media, that's the Catullus for our times. Much more than *I, Clodia*.

ML: I'm struck by the fact that Atkinson re-genders Catullus, in a way that's analogous to *I, Clodia*. *Catulla et al* also plays with gender, but very, very differently, because Atkinson is modernising.

AJ: What I'm doing is so straight in comparison.

ML: And this builds on some of the things you've already talked about. Do you see your response to Catullus as one which is filtered through that history of other responses? Or do you try as much as possible to come fresh to the material?

AJ: No, well, I suppose both in a way were much more coming fresh to the material. Informed by reading other things, but obliquely really. So *Catullus for Children* was informed by that sense of possibility of the different kind of voices that could be put at play to translate Catullus. But then the whole point was to find a completely different voice, a new voice. I was borrowing a kind of Frank O'Hara conversational tone I saw in some of the translation from the 1970s, but I also borrowed from the Renaissance translations with the beautiful imagery and the hyperbole and the exaggerations and the similes and metaphor and playing with that lushness. Perhaps those influences are there in *I, Clodia* too, but there I was working much more closely with... well not so much the rhythms and languages of Catullus, of course, because I was relying on translations, although I read the Latin as well as I could alongside the translations. But I was working with the rhythms of the thought, the patterning of argument, that I saw in Catullus.

ML: There's a very different feel to the language of *Catullus for Children* and *I, Clodia*, and so it makes sense to me that you're conceptualising the projects in such different ways. I was struck actually when I was re-reading poems from *I, Clodia* in the last couple of days that some of the syntax almost feels to me like it's come from the Latin. It's quite formal or quite different from the stuff in *Catullus for Children*. I was thinking about the poem called '[unsent]':

We were always walking towards the day we'd be parted.
This is the darkness that we in our blindness were shining before us.
I must live now always knowing the death of my husband
meant to me first of all not to be able to send you this poem.

Something makes me feel like it's come from a long time ago or come from another language. Whereas *Catullus for Children* feels like it's really immediate, colloquial. So as someone who reads a lot of Latin and thinks in a kind of Latinish English, that was something that I pulled out from *I, Clodia*.

AJ: I like to hear that. And I like to hear that I've kind of worked my way into a sort of Latinish English. I guess what I was picking up was the way the Latin can kind of enfold thought in a thought.

ML: And it's similar to a kind of a complex English that you find say in 1800's novels, like Dickensian English or Jane Austen's... Lots of embedded clauses. ... If you read a lot of Latin or Greek, you get used to doing that...

AJ: Following a complicated sentence...

ML: Yes, and holding the verb off to the end, and talking to someone in English and they look at you funny and say, "What are you talking about?"

AJ: I quite often have to unpick my academic writing because the sentences get too long and embedded. But '[unsent]' is also in a kind of imitation of a Latin elegiac metre, so fitting a thought to dactyls and spondees is going to make it sound less like ordinary conversational English.

ML: How do you feel that your academic writing or process relates to your poetic writing or process?

AJ: To me, they feel like two very different ways of thinking. I've written more on fiction than on poetry, academically, but I have just begun to write about poetry, and I don't think it is affecting how I write it... I've been reading Jonathan Culler on lyric poetry and when I read the chapter on the importance of the present tense in lyric poetry, I wondered whether I wrote in the present tense myself, and I went back to *I, Clodia*, especially the second half and looked through my poetry, and found that I was doing everything he said lyric poetry does. But that was before I had read his book. You don't read the book on lyric poetry and then apply the rules. The interesting thing of course would be not to apply the rules, to see what happens if you carefully strip them away, if you carefully write in the past tense, or...

ML: It does strike me that the *Clodia* poems are in the present as you say but that there is a lot of looking back and looking forward – and not just looking forward to the next poem from Catullus coming in...

AJ: Yes, yes, I like that.

ML: But also looking forward to after Clodia's death when she'll be a ghost, and to Catullus' posterity. I found that really interesting, particularly contrasting it with *Catullus for Children* where there is this immediacy.

AJ: Again these are things that Jonathan Culler talks about in writing about the lyric, that's what lyric poetry does, it preserves the present but it's a present that doesn't belong to its historical moment – that looks ahead, that looks into the future, that looks to readers. You're not writing to the person next to you – although in mine, Clodia is.

ML: You play with the idea of communication, by having Clodia respond to various poems and letters from other people that we never see. And her responses range, with some being written for herself, others that she sends to people. It's like you're playing with different levels of and types of communication.

AJ: And you don't quite know which of those are being sent either, I'm not really sure. They're to the brother, but not really. Well maybe, that's one that he might read. But is she sending Caelius Rufus his?

ML: We already talked about whether you see yourself coming to Catullus via the tradition. Let's talk specifically about the New Zealand tradition of say, Baxter and Stead. Do you see yourself in that line of people working with Catullus? Or do you see it more globally?

AJ: That's an interesting question. No, not so much in the line in the sense of I don't feel like I'm extending Stead's work to make a New Zealand Catullus. I feel he really fully accomplished that already. It doesn't feel like work that really needs to be done. So no, except that in the same way that reading Stevie Smith gives you a sense of what a different kind of voice you can bring to the classics. Reading Catullus set on the black sand beaches of Auckland's West Coast, that must have given me a sense of how close to home Catullus can be.

ML: And Baxter?

AJ: I haven't read a lot of Baxter poems with classical references. I love the *Jerusalem Sonnets*, so those are the Baxter poems that I read again and again and return to. I have a very selected Baxter. So I'm not responding to Baxter in terms of the classical tradition.

ML: My impression (as a relatively recent transplant to New Zealand) is that twentieth-century New Zealand writers were grappling with this issue of what is a New Zealand identity and what does it mean. Has that affected your work? Do you see yourself writing within a European tradition, or an Anglophone tradition or do you see yourself simply as a New Zealand poet?

AJ: It's a really interesting question. I think the Classics feels to me like a space apart from national literatures in a way. I guess it is the global Classics that I want to take part in. That it's really not about being a New Zealand writer in a New Zealand context, that this is a space apart, that's there for everyone, that everyone has access to. This is a tradition that we're allowed to enter from anywhere, and that has been open to so many different voices and

perspectives, with so many different people claiming the Classics for so many different purposes. It feels like there's a real freedom in that.

ML: It was interesting at the Athens to Aotearoa [a conference held at Victoria University of Wellington, August-September 2014, where both Lewis and Jackson spoke about Catullus' reception] hearing different writers including Witi Ihimaera and also Marion Maguire, who's pakeha, hearing them talk about fusing a New Zealand kind of European and Maori identity via the Classics.

AJ: And Robert Sullivan has done some really interesting work... his *Captain Cook in the Underworld* borrows the Orpheus myth, and his *Star Waka* collection is full of Classical references, alongside references to Maori mythology, pop culture and his everyday life.

ML: Are there any aspects of the Catullus poems, either *Catullus for Children* or *I, Clodia* that you consider particularly to be related to New Zealand? I imagine more in *Catullus for Children*.

AJ: Yeah, the *Catullus for Children*, those poems, they're very, very close to home. They were written when we were living in Owairaka with my small children playing with all the children in our cul-de-sac. There was a girl called Punam and a boy called Aman next door, and then Theresa and Jason lived across the road, which gave me a nice combination of names for the collection. So all the stories are very local and immediate. Harder to answer in *I, Clodia*.

ML: I don't see any particularly New Zealand aspects in *I, Clodia*. Which is also interesting because that's why I wondered whether, if you do see yourself as working within the New Zealand tradition, it seems to me that that would work for one collection but not necessarily the other.

AJ: I think *Catullus for Children* was more an extension of the Karl Stead project – you know, if we're going to bring Catullus home, how might we do this? How could I do this differently given it's already been done?

ML: But as you say, you were very influenced by all those other translations, which are very international. At least while being in English. So what you were just talking about, the kind of local flavour of *Catullus for Children*. Was that something that you sort of planned consciously, or did it just kind of develop organically as you were writing?

AJ: No, it was always going to be very local and domestic, that was the point of it – how close to home can I bring Catullus? But it was very easy to find the occasion for any Catullus poem I wanted to write my own version of, our lives just kept...we seemed to be living in a Catullus sequence.

ML: In your 2006 article about the *Catullus for Children* poems [*Antichthon* volume 40] you talk about the strategy of blending multiple Catullus antecedents within a single poem. And that works so well because the Catullus poems themselves are so often intertwined that you do tend to read multiple poems together.

AJ: Yes, and it was nice having the same characters appear in different poems as they do in the Catullus. It was just that the same neighbourhood children were in most of our daily adventures.

ML: What set you off on the path of writing *I, Clodia* and what prompted the change of approach to Catullus? Can you talk a little bit about what the process was, was there something in particular that made you go “I gotta do it now” or “I’m ready”?

AJ: I don’t remember when I started writing *I, Clodia*, because there was *Thicket* in between *I, Clodia* and *The Gas Leak*, but I think it follows on from *The Gas Leak*. *Thicket* collected together poems I’d been writing for some time. So really *I, Clodia* comes after *The Gas Leak* and the *The Gas Leak* developed my interest in narrative. I loved writing *The Gas Leak* so much. It was so much fun to have a narrative structure, or a metaphysical structure really, where I was always looking for a triangle in anything I was writing about. In every poem, I needed the ‘I,’ the ‘you’ and the theological – the God figure or the burglar figure. So I guess I was looking for something to replace that, I needed another gap to fill, in the same way that there you have a triangle structured around an absence. So I guess that *I Clodia*’s a step backwards in a way, I’ve just got a binary instead of a triangular structure. I am the absence; I’m filling the gap there.

ML: And did you start writing and then go, “Oh I’ve got to do some research!” or did you approach it from the research perspective? Because I know you’ve said at some point that you’ve talked to Jeff Tatum, and you’ve talked to Marilyn Skinner as well.

AJ: Yeah, she was wonderful. So that must have come a little bit later. I must have done some research before writing the first poems. But obviously not very good research because I had to throw those out. And they held me back for a long time because I was so pleased with the witty turns in those first poems that I wrote, but the chronology I established later on didn’t allow me to keep them, I had her brother in the forum making laws at the same time as she was first being courted by Catullus. To begin with, I wasn’t working out a chronology, I was just working with the Catullus poems. I suppose to begin with I was working out what kind of poems they would be – the scale of the poems, the pace, the movement, the kind of a voice, the sorts of... how you would pattern an argumentative response, what it might look like as poetry really. And then when I got a little bit more systematic about it, I went through all the Catullus poems just piecing out the Clodia story by going through the poems in order, setting out poem 2 and 2b and 3 and 5, going through each of the Catullus poems that seemed to belong to the Clodia story. I ended up with 31 poems to work with, and that seemed to be about the size of a small collection. Because I was going to work with the poems in this

order, the same order they appear in the Catullus books, from very early on I had an idea of a collection that was going to end with the claim for mutual love in perpetuity. But originally without any idea of making a claim that this was the last poem the end of the story. This was just going to be a set of poems in the wrong order, a random set of poems that weren't going to add up to a story.

ML: The sequence now proceeds chronologically; what caused you to change your approach?

AJ: What happened was that I found I couldn't really inhabit the position of Clodia writing to Catullus without knowing where I was in the story, even though I had the poems, and I was just responding each poem, and even though as a reader I didn't really know where that poem was in the story and could still read it. But to read the poems and write poems as Clodia, I felt I needed to know where I was in the story.

ML: And so then did you basically just proceed chronologically?

AJ: Then I read a range of different chronologies and about the questions raised by various constructions of chronologies and the arguments about which sister it could really have been and when the trip to Troy could possibly have been and whether it was the same as the trip to Bithynia. But what I set down were just the particular date markers that either everyone agrees on, or in some of the dates you make a call, you decide on balance who must be right, or which of these equally plausible possibilities works better for the story.

ML: And you have Clodia's husband Metellus bring Catullus back from Gaul. Is that something that you came up with?

AJ: Well, we know that Metellus was in Gaul at the time that the affair is likely to have begun and we know that the Catullus family was the family that he would have been most likely to be hosted by. So it seems very likely that if Catullus around this time is beginning to write to Clodia, Metellus would have made the introduction.

ML: Interesting. Did you actually end up responding to all of the Catullus poems?

AJ: That's a good question. To begin with, the collection responds almost poem by poem, with a sparrow poem, a Sappho poem, the kissing poems. But then as I get into the story I would write these responses to a Catullus poem but maybe only a piece of it would be used, but then that same poem is also going to do some other narrative work. The demands of narrative are beginning to take over. I think all of them will have some relation to one of the Catullus poems in one way or another. Although some of them have very little. So the Caelius Rufus one, "Distract me, I said not bore me to tears with the tired old chivalry of Alexander the Great!" has very little connection to a Catullus poem, except that I needed to introduce Caelius Rufus. The Alexander the Great reference came from following up a lead

in T. P. Wiseman's *Catullus and His World*. One of the clues to his character was his interest in Alexander the Great, apparently he was obsessed with the account Cleitarchus gives of Alexander's defeat of Darius near Issus. Wiseman's footnote directs us to N.G.L.

Hammond's *Three Historians of Alexander the Great*, which left me at a loss to understand why this historical moment could have been important to Caelius, since the account by Cleitarchus oddly plays down Alexander's skill and agency, attributing his win to a series of accidents. I thought it couldn't be the battle scenes at all, but the scene after the battle, in which Alexander takes over Darius's camp, helping himself to his bath, but consoles the women with the assurance they would be treated with honour. I thought a scene in which he takes over – rightfully – everything belonging to a more powerful man, while still appearing a hero through his chivalry towards the women, had exactly the combination of sentimentality and self-indulgence that could sketch in a sense of character.

ML: One of the things I like about the *I, Clodia* sequence is that sense that there's more going on with Clodia than just Catullus, but also that those details of the rest of her life come up organically in the sequence. As an ancient historian or classicist reading biofiction it can start to feel like you're ticking off all the ancient sources that the writer has used, perhaps mechanically, but with the *I, Clodia* it felt to me like Clodia genuinely lived in this world and things that we know from the sources were coming up because they were happening.

AJ: I think as a poet reading poetry, you have a sense of both the relation between the poetry and the life but also how much more the life is, what a small intersection that is. And also I was reading a lot of different things, I was reading about wall paintings and gladiators, plane trees and animals.

ML: Clodia as a mother appears in here, which is unusual. This isn't a twenty-five-year-old woman; this is a forty year-old or a middle-aged woman who's imagining how her children would feel in the same position.

AJ: It's a very small part, it's just one little piece.

ML: It opens up this whole other dimension to her character that we don't find in a lot of the other versions of her. Is your Clodia fictional? Is Clodia entirely your creation? Is she based on anyone? Is she partly you?

AJ: I think she's very much me, but writing as Clodia. I guess it's another way in which poetry doesn't work the way biofiction does, or a novelisation. You're not having to imagine a character that you describe or a character that you're looking at from the outside, you're taking a position. So I was taking a position in relation to the Catullus poems. In that sense it's not very different from reading. It's a very engaged form of reading. That's partly what I liked about the project, that it was a way of reading Catullus very intimately. So the Clodia voice comes very much from the pattern of responses that the Catullus poems suggest that they need. The bantering voice that he has, there has to be a voice that could banter with. The

teasing lines in his poems, well she must have been teasing back for this to be any fun. And I want her to win a lot of these exchanges. And then there's the shape of the Catullus poems where there's often more than one thing happening, there'll be a twist. So he'll set up an anecdote or a story which is already making one joke, or doing one piece of work, but then there'll be a turn – he'll turn it around or turn it back on himself or turn it against Clodia in a surprising way or turn it against his rival in a way that's unexpected. What looks like a friendly gesture becomes a barb or the other way around. So I wanted those turns as well. That does very much construct the character, just through how the poetry works.

ML: But she's a much more intelligible person who emerges than if you had just taken Catullus' poetry about Lesbia and said, "what can we extract from that?" Then you get a contradictory, overly-dramatic, poisonous, fabulous woman. That doesn't really hang together because so much of it is from Catullus' perspective, whereas what you've created is a quite complex character, but intelligible.

AJ: It probably is very much me thinking, "what would I have written?" I suppose. It's intelligible to someone reading this now. For all my talk about the classics as a space out of time and out of politics and out of nation, this is very much my imagination and my voice as a New Zealand writer in the twenty-first century.

ML: I would from the outside think there is more Anna Jackson in *Catullus for Children* than *I, Clodia*, but it almost sounds like it's the opposite...

AJ: I was interested in how the portrait poems I wrote in the second half of the *I, Clodia* collection changed how people were reading my work. For instance, Paula Green writing about them suggested there was a real movement here into fiction and drama. But really I felt most of them are just the same as the poems that I might have written in the first-person in *Thicket*, a collection that people read very autobiographically, and yet it was really just as fictional, while the portrait poems in *I, Clodia* are just as autobiographical as the poems in *Thicket*. They're always both. Most of the occasions are made up, but the thoughts are real, or sometimes the occasions are real but they're given to a character. It doesn't feel to me that there's very much of a difference.

ML: We're not trained to respond or to understand that very effectively as readers nowadays. I think that two thousand years ago people learning Latin, learning Greek, were trained better to understand that the 'I' in Sappho is not necessarily Sappho and it's simultaneously Sappho. And I think that Catullus...

AJ: Well it's interesting that these questions are really coming into fiction recently, with writers like Ben Lerner. Do you know Ben Lerner? He's really very, very funny. He's an American poet, but much more interesting as a novelist, and his first novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, was about a character who is a poet and feels a complete fraud as a poet. Which makes it really hard to read his poetry now because it is so similar to the parodic

poetry that his fraud character is writing. But he's a brilliant novelist, and part of what he's doing is playing with this question of autobiography and fictionality, he really teases the reader by setting up situations that look very like the story of his own life. In his second novel, *10.04*, he calls his fictional character Ben Lerner and he includes in the novel a story that his character is writing which is a story he has already published himself in the *New Yorker* as Ben Lerner. So the line between character and author is very thin. And his character Ben Lerner in that novel talks about why he feels far more comfortable as a poet than a novelist because a poet's allowed to cross this line between fictionality and autobiography, or rather, there is no line, or as a poet you're always on that line between autobiography and fiction. But it's neither, it's just doing aesthetic work that is allowed, that necessarily is autobiographical even as... Does it matter whether it's fiction or not?

ML: I was thinking about this recently in relation to street-scapes and geography in novels and thinking about how much more effective it is when someone writes about a city that they know as a setting. That means that for a realistic novel the setting has to be real for the fiction to work. I was thinking about that kind of paradox and I mean, that's very different in poetry.

AJ: Yes, it is very different in poetry. There are different kind of markers that allow you to believe in the world. Having just made the case for it not mattering whether poetry is fictional or autobiographical, I was very disturbed when Jenny Bornholdt admitted that the blue blender in one of her poems wasn't really a blue blender. And she said, "well it's poetry, it doesn't have to be real at all." But that wasn't how that poem worked. That poem worked, to me, in the way that the Frank O'Hara poems work, I suppose, that... I suppose in part what you're responding to, what you're enjoying, is the performance of someone pulling the incidental details of their own life into a shape before your eyes; that they seem such instant, quick responses to the real. A patterning of the real. To know that it wasn't blue, for me took away from the performance of the game I thought she was playing.

ML: I think a lot of people feel similarly about Catullus in that, once you read a lot of Greek and Latin literature you can see what he's responding to and building on. Some of his Lesbia poems are responses to Callimachus as much as they are responses to her. And for some people that ruins the game, because it's important to them that this really happened. Whereas for me that makes it more interesting.

AJ: I want to believe both. I want to believe both that it really happened and also that he is playing with the classics, as part of the game he is playing with Clodia, and so that sets up the challenge for her to do the same. What can she do with Callimachus? Or if he's going to use the Jason and Medea story, well, if we turn it this way, we have a different story. These are the same elements, but watch what I can do with this. Of course it's intertextual, it always is.

ML: How long did it take you to write *I, Clodia*?

AJ: I started really working on the series in October 2012, and I remember very vividly talking to my friends Robert Sullivan and Diana Harris about the project in February 2013, and at that point I was really feeling very much right in the middle of it. Not wanting to put it down and really wanting to get to the end of it to see what I had written, but also not wanting to finish writing it because I wanted to be able to go on writing it forever. I remember very clearly the enthusiasm of talking about it and how much I was loving writing it in February. Then I had a month in Rome in April when I could work full time on the project. Then I finished it in winter in June. We have a place in Rangataua, which is a sort of skiing bach, where I stayed for a week and finished the sequence. One of the poems I had been saving up to write was the response to poem 36. I think I didn't quite know how I was going to answer it when I went to Rangataua, but I had a sense of what it would have to do and I really wanted that poem to work. It had to work in terms of the narrative but it also had to make the argument that would set up his poem as a response. So that was one of the gaps that still had to be filled in. There would have been maybe about six poems still to be written. So that was that week in June. And I just remember getting to the end and thinking, "I've finished it, this is it, I've done it! I didn't know if I could do it and I have!" And then this feeling, "Well what if I crash on the way home?"

ML: And that poem that you're talking about, that's 'Some Poet from the Provinces', right?

AJ: That's the one.

ML: And that's the precursor to Catullus 36?

AJ: Yes, because I just had to make sense of that line: the best poem from the worst poet...

ML: You've mentioned to me before that you wanted to bring in poems 63 and 64. Were they ones that you pegged as Lesbia poems or were they just too good to leave out?

AJ: I think I must have been reading them as Lesbia poems, yeah. When I was first going through the Catullus poems, looking for Lesbia poems, they weren't in my list of poems I picked out. They only came in when I had more of a sense of narrative and a chronology, and so this made them important, because of where he was, at the time he must have been writing them, where they would have been placed in terms of the chronology I had constructed. In terms of the narrative drama this is a really important time but he's not writing to her... But then reading those poems in the context of the story, and thinking of her reading them after an apparently terrible betrayal, a seemingly irreparable rift... It was impossible not to read them as about their story. And if you think they are, they just seem to be very clearly about their story.

ML: What was it that attracted you to Clodia in particular rather than any of the other female characters from Latin poetry or Greek poetry or even Roman history or Greek history?

AJ: It was that.... The space for her that he constructs. And I think that you do get far more of a sense of the reality of her in the Catullus poems than you do in Propertius and Tibullus. I don't know them well enough to have a belief about whether those characters... whether... how real they might have been. But you get far more of a sense of a literary convention and a kind of... the female characters as placeholders. But Clodia didn't feel like a placeholder, it felt like the poems were having to construct a place or make a space around some kind of vivid reality.

ML: I understand what you mean. And I think that a lot of people find that in Catullus in a way that they don't find that in Propertius or Ovid or Tibullus. I really like the fact that in *I, Clodia*, that you make Clodia a reader, because I think that that's an important reality; that these Roman women, particularly upper-class women would have been reading and would have been responding to the poems and it's interesting to think about how they respond. Then that you go that extra step further and make her a poet, and even then a step further beyond that, you give her credit for inspiring Catullus' Poem 64. How did you get that idea?

AJ: Well I was reading all the Catullus poems with a sense of him writing to someone... throwing these poems out there to provoke some kind of response.

ML: And there's a point in 'Late Summer Sun' where you have Clodia write:

where I'll lie down on a coverlet
spread out for me by a poet.

Were you thinking with that line that Clodia and Ariadne are kind of assimilated? Or am I over-reading?

AJ: No, no, no, absolutely! That Catullus and Clodia are writing obliquely to each other even when they're writing about other stories. So that if he's writing about Ariadne, he's expecting her to read herself into that story, he's giving her the coverlet with the story of Theseus and Ariadne on it. That's what I saw them doing. I mean, Catullus himself writes about the erotics of reading and writing – I'm thinking of that poem to the friend, Licinius?

ML: Poem 50.

AJ: That erotic charge, that seems essential to the Catullus relationship.

ML: It's an interesting take – Clodia as Ariadne – because a lot of the language in Poem 64 echoes Catullus' language that he uses to talk to Lesbia in some of the other poems. It was quite a common thing in scholarship about twenty years ago for people to talk about Catullus and Ariadne being linked, or Catullus talking through Ariadne. And I think that's a viable interpretation. But I like this twist that it's actually potentially Clodia who is Ariadne.

AJ: There are reversals around and around, aren't there? I just see them trading places.

ML: And Medea and Jason, which one of them is Medea?

AJ: In one poem she's Jason and in another Medea, and the same with Ariadne and Theseus, who's on the shore lamenting who's leaving whom. They're both always leaving each other and betraying each other and each of them can turn their stories around on the other.

ML: You mentioned earlier the great betrayal before he goes off to the East. In your mind, what is that betrayal?

AJ: That's the poem that she sends to break off the relationship... which I'm thinking gives rise to the series of poems that he wrote about her hard-heartedness, poems like poem 60: "Was it some lioness on African hills or a Scylla barking from her womb below that bore you to have a mind so hard and inhuman as to treat with scorn a suppliant's plea in his last need?" Wiseman points out that the lioness and Scylla are from Euripides, in Jason's complaint to the cruel Medea, the very imagery Cicero uses in the court case against Clodia, *and* imagery Catullus uses again in poem 64, as Ariadne, against Theseus. Then, one of the questions I had to resolve when I was working out the chronology is how his travelling East fitted in to the story. Is he travelling away to leave her? Is this the end of their relationship, as the poem in Sapphics suggests? Or is he leaving because of his brother's death? Or was he travelling for business reasons? So many reasons have been proposed for his travels, it was hard to tell a good story accounting for them. A choice needed to be made between those different reasons except that they do all seem compelling. We know that his brother died. We know he wrote the elegy. We don't know that he was really there. But it's a better poem if he was. I think always my interpretations... if there are scholarly questions that aren't resolved, I want to work with the answers – if they're equally well-justified – that makes for the better poem. So, I wanted to accept that he travelled to Troy on his brother's death. But in terms of the narrative, the two answers seemed to undo each other. If his departure was his way of finally renouncing this relationship, but while he was away he would also be visiting his brother's grave and doing some business, that really takes away from the power of this departure as the drawing of a final line between him and Clodia. But equally, if he's travelling to his brother's grave, the poignancy and importance of that journey is really lost if at the same time he's firing back poems to Clodia... "oh and I'm leaving you". So to make that work in terms of narrative, to allow the poems to work most effectively for me as a reader, to allow the emotion that I was reading in the poems that felt so true and vivid and didn't feel compromised was to think "what if when his brother died, she had just written the poem that ended their relationship, the poem that wins the game from her point of view?" For so long they've had this exchange where they're each holding each other at bay and presenting themselves as the better victim in terms of who are we in these stories that we're telling. If she can win that round but win it in a way that loses the game for her... They've got this standoff relationship where they both really want each other but they can't give in to each other in part because of the game... there have been all kinds of reasons for her holding him at bay, but at a point the reason becomes that the relationship is so founded on the fights that they're engaged in, or the competition that they're engaged in, that winning the competition

loses you the love. If he withdrew from the competition, if he asked her to lay down arms, that would be perhaps at the point that his brother had died. So at the point where he needed them to stop playing games, he actually needed her, and with raw emotion he could ask her to drop the game. If he could be asking her that, at the very point where she decisively wins the game with the most brilliant poem that she's written yet in this sequence, well that's the end. And the timing worked that they would be at that point in the competition that she could win at the very point that he might have been asking her to drop the game, to console him in his grief. And because they're sending letters, or poems, rather than speaking to each other, they could so easily have missed... the timing must so often have been off. Especially because, how are these poems being exchanged? So many of them are being exchanged indirectly through public recital or relying on word getting back to hear through other people, what other people have been writing. So if she were writing this as a public performance, well that makes it even worse, doesn't it really? She's winning the game in public, with other people enjoying her winning of that round.

ML: I like that I needed you to explain some of that to me, because again I think this comes back to what we were talking about earlier that it's not biofiction in that it still leaves a lot of questions. It still leaves you thinking; "why is this fight happening"? That's something I think is a strength of the sequence.

AJ: It was quite hard for me to be able to work out whether I'd put enough in... I wanted to put enough in that readers could follow the story that I wanted to construct. But every poem also had to work as a poem and the sequence needed to have a lightness and pacing that meant I had to keep pulling out a lot of narrative explanation, to keep it moving fast enough, to keep each poem moving fast enough. So I worried about whether I told enough. And it sounds like I haven't quite told enough for that story to be clear. And that was why I wrote the story in the notes, but perhaps not enough of it, because I was just providing the historical facts. The most important section in the notes is the list of the Catullus poems in the particular order in which they might be read alongside my Clodia poems. I don't know whether very many people might have read them against the poems but it gives you a story I think if you do read them in that order, alongside my sequence.

ML: It's hard for me to be any kind of judge because I'm the extreme end of one kind of reader. But I did actually want you to explain something, 'Five minutes'. Can you explain how it fits into the sequence and what in your mind is going on in this point of the story?

AJ: At this point I'm imagining he's read her 'Some poet from the provinces', this is bringing him back. So this would be when or just before he would have been writing his, "She's promised me love in perpetuity." So those poems are the false sail, the white sail, promising, "yes! I have returned safely. We will be reunited, you'll have the happiness that you were watching the sails for." Except that he's going to die, so they don't have this happiness. So that's the red stain I'm taking that... Peter Green suggested tuberculosis as a reason for his earlier death, didn't he? I don't know how much basis there is for that.

ML: As far as I know there's none at all, not like Keats.

AJ: But we want him to have an early death, he has to die of something, and this gives me my red stain for my white sail.

ML: Hence the coughing?

AJ: Hence the coughing. It probably is a little bit cryptic. So again it's just putting in enough that I hope people piece together the story.

ML: Well I think it's better to put in...

AJ: It's a little suggestive...

ML: It's better to err on the side of being economical than being excessive I think...

AJ: I wanted the poems to work as poems, and I wanted the sequence to move, to have movement.

ML: Elena Theodorakopoulos has looked at your work in the context of her research on women poets and women writers. She's looking particularly at how the gender of the author might come into play. But not everybody agrees that it's useful to study women writers as a group. Where do you stand on this? Do you think that your gender and/or sex are important factors for your poetry?

AJ: Well, writing *I, Clodia*, it's very much taking a woman's perspective, isn't it? I don't know what more to say about that because it seems so obvious really... I think that maybe men reading Catullus and identifying with Catullus have read Clodia less sympathetically, feeling defensive for Catullus. But for me reading a male poet addressing a woman, the position of Clodia is the obvious position for me to be in. Of course as a woman you're often identifying with the male poets you love as well. I read Frank O'Hara and I want to write like Frank O'Hara. I read Coleridge and I'm reading as Coleridge, I'm dreaming that dream alongside Coleridge. So I don't think you're limited to reading as a woman. But I think it was a very easy position for me to take, to take the position of Clodia.

ML: Do you consider *I, Clodia* to be a feminist text?

AJ: Tentatively? So yes in the sense that I'm writing as a woman and that there are going to be feminist implications to thinking from the woman's position, of course. But not in the sense of working as a feminist artist, in that there's a difference between a feminist artistic or scholarly project, which has a feminist purpose, and writing by a feminist which has an aesthetic purpose. So, if as a feminist you're wanting to draw attention to the pay gap and

construct a work that does that work, that would be one thing. A woman writing without a feminist agenda, there are still going to be feminist implications to the work that she writes, but in terms of doing feminist work, this doesn't seem to be the most direct or effective way to do it. If I were to effect feminist change, well this is a very... the amount of work into writing a book like *I, Clodia* compared to the amount of feminist good it's going to do...it is not the most efficient thing I could do. I think a far more important feminist project, for instance, is the work that Josephine Balmer has done translating Roman women poets that no-one except classicists is otherwise able to read. That's work that, in terms of returns for the amount of work that you're doing, even if the work involved is much more than is involved in writing a sequence like *I, Clodia*, seems far more worthwhile, at least in terms of feminist politics, because the effects are tremendous and so important. So my aim for *I, Clodia* is... primarily aesthetic. I just want to write something that gives me aesthetic satisfaction and that for readers has a beauty to it, I hope?