This essay on literary translation begins during a warm summer afternoon in the middle of Laurel Lake in Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire. I have been swimming out past an area protected by convention for recreational swimming, into the expansive center of the lake, where I am wary of drunken motorboaters and from which I can no longer see the summit of Mount Monadnock, but can still make out the rocky bottom several fathoms beneath me. I have arrived here in my own leisurely fashion, varying the strokes I learned in childhood and feeling the exercise of my muscles. Now I lie still in the water and think about swimming.

My wife had been going to the local YMCA regularly and swimming laps all winter. Never having accompanied her, I had always assumed that she swam her lengths the way I swam mine, using a leisurely breaststroke, a long, languid crawl, and a sidestroke for relief from even these dog-day exertions.

Not so, I realized suddenly when we were swimming together earlier this summer. She swims nothing but a kind of smooth, glorified dog-paddle. My mental picture of all her narratives of events and neighbors in the YMCA pool had to be completely revised. It looked nothing like the truth.

This revelation was of a piece with other small shocks to my automatic assumption system. My wife is European and always brushes her teeth with warm water. She was as appalled to learn that I brushed my teeth with cold water as I was on learning her preference. Since then, I have found that it’s quite ordinary for Europeans to brush with warm water, and that even such a simple act as “brushing your teeth” carries in it very different sensations for Europeans and for Americans. We do not mean the same thing, sensuously, when we use the same phrase.

And I have been reading Ovid. I have read a great deal of Ovid over the past thirty-five years, both in the original and in translation—I was startled once to realize that I had more volumes by Ovid on my poetry shelf than by any other writer—and Ovid was among the very first poets I ever tried to translate. Every new translation I read sends me back to the original.

In his Metamorphoses, Ovid tells the story of Hermaphroditus watched by the nymph Salmacis as he slips into the water for a solitary swim:
which, in about as literal a rendition as can make more than pony sense, goes:

rapid he, having slapped [his] body with hollow palms
dives into liquids and leading alternate arms
[he] gleams through liquid waters . . .

This is all very well. It seems clear enough what Hermaphroditus is doing—“leading alternate arms”—it is the overarm stroke that we call freestyle or the crawl. He is not merely swimming, but swimming with a particular action that calls up a specific visual image. Ovid’s specificity here is far clearer than the simple abstraction “swim,” which can lead to the kind of mistaken picture I had created of my wife in the YMCA pool.

An act of translation is not simply a rendering of a text. It is also a distillation of the translator’s own cultural and personal experience. The coincidence of my own experience and a contemplation of the Latin text led me to look at translations of Ovid’s lines not so much for what they tell us about the poet, but for what they reveal about his translators. Note that Ovid does not write that Hermaphroditus is swimming, and yet a casual reader retelling the story might easily summarize the action with that generalization, and then translate it back into his or her own concept of the action. And this is precisely what Ovid’s translators have done.

Ovid’s sixteenth-century English translator Arthur Golding (whom Shakespeare read) understood the action in a way that seems completely at odds with Ovid himself, when he writes:

He clapping with his hollow hands against his naked sides,
Into the water lithe and baine with armes displayed glydes.
And rowing with his hands and legges swimmes in the water cleare . . .

“Rowing with his hands and legs” in no way describes the crawl, and Golding is specific in his physical metaphor. Why does he contradict the text here? Most likely, I guessed from the beginning, because for Golding writing in 1567, swimming was something more like our breaststroke than
like the crawl, and alternating arms made no visual sense to him. He “saw” the act of swimming as I had seen my wife’s, in terms that made sense to his own experience.

This guess was confirmed for me a year after my original speculative plunge in Laurel Lake, when the poet Jared Carter of land-locked Indianapolis sent me a book-length essay on swimming by Charles Sprawson. From this book, I learned that, in England,

swimmers had adopted as the model for style the actions of the frog, which had displaced the dog that had been the inspiration until the Elizabethan age . . . The cult of the breaststroke lasted until the end of the nineteenth century.

“Rowing with his hands and legs” describes a breaststroke as well as can be. It is clearly not Ovid’s Roman stroke, but it is recognizably competent swimming.

What are we to make of Rolfe Humphries’ version, which has Hermaphroditus “flailing through the water,” in as great a departure from the Latin original as Golding’s? Clearly, either the swimmer or the translator is completely at sea, and I venture that Humphries was no swimmer at all, at least in his imagination, and had little pictorial sense of the necessary strokes.²

Hermaphroditus, in a recent translation by Allen Mandelbaum, shows us the motion even more specifically than Ovid himself does, but the explicit left and right help recover an effect lost from the Latin word order—the ability to convey a back-and-forth, alternating movement by the placement of adjectives and nouns:

With hollow palms he claps his sides, then dives with grace into the waves; his left, his right arms alternating strokes; he glides . . .

Mandelbaum takes that gliding motion from Golding, but restores the Roman overarm stroke. The gliding in both of their translations is an interesting reduction of Ovid’s moving picture. In the original, the body is seen glistening in the water, it shines through (translucet) like a fish. “Gliding” puts the emphasis back on the swimming motion itself.

A. D. Melville’s 1986 translation uses the abstract word Ovid ignores:
He clapped his hollow palms against his sides  
And dived into the pool and, as he swam  
Arm over arm, gleamed in the limpid water . . .

as do two freer translations that do not shirk the exercise of visualizing Hermaphroditus’ style. On one hand, Ted Hughes, in Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun’s *After Ovid*, returns in an old-fashioned way to an English breaststroke and the model of the frog:

And suddenly he was swimming, a head bobbing,  
Chin surging through the build of a bow-wave,  
Shoulders liquefied,  
Legs as if at home in the frog’s grotto . . .

while David R. Slavitt’s water nymph Salmacis watches him

dive into the pool and swim  
with strong arms that cut the water and legs that kicked  
the clear water to froth . . .

which is a clearly imagined crawl, allowing for some lack of discipline in the scissors kick.

But can we be sure of our visual picture from Ovid himself? Another line of inquiry set me wondering what our classical forebears saw when they translated the word “swimming” into action, if indeed they used such a word at all. (Remember that Ovid doesn’t.) If the overarm stroke comes to us only from the South Pacific and only in relatively modern times—as many, including Sprawson, seem to think—what did swimmers in the Mediterranean basin do? Happily, there is evidence that Sprawson is mistaken. According to Dr. Phillip Whitten, “An ancient Egyptian wall relief clearly shows soldiers of Ramses II using an overarm stroke to pursue their Hittite enemies across the Orontes River more than 3,200 years ago.” (The breaststroke, according to Dr. Whitten, has been depicted “on rock drawings, friezes, and pottery throughout the world.”)

And Ovid’s older contemporary Propertius also closely describes the act of swimming without naming it, “teneat clausam tenui Teuthrantis in unda/alternæ facilis cedere lympha manu,” which I would roughly put: “Let the fresh spring water of Teuthra hold you in its weak wave/easy to move one hand after the other.” “One hand after the other” may be that same *alternus* (-a,
-um) of Ovid’s “alternate arms.” Vincent Katz translates \textit{alternae manu} as “arm over arm,” yet the difference between Ovid’s arm and Propertius’ hand may be more nuanced and exact than Katz allows. The motion seems to be the same motion—but perhaps, after all, closer to my wife’s dog-paddling than to a full-bodied crawl.

One other Ovidian, the nymph Arethusa, also gets caught in the act of swimming. But, either from different individual characterization, or else because she is female (and yet Propertius’ imagined swimmer is also a woman), the poet describes her exercise less as an athletic action than as aimless play:

\[
\ldots \textit{ferioque trahoque} \\
\textit{mille modis labens excussaque brachia iacto.}
\]

For the record, here is how our translators render these lines. Sir Arthur Golding finds Arethusa more purposeful than the others:

And threw my selfe amid the streame, which as I dallyingly  
Did beate and draw, and with my selfe a thousand maistries trie,  
In casting of mine armes abrode and swimming wantonly.

Rolfe Humphries, the ideational non-swimmer, is obviously at no disadvantage here, but is again, distantly vaguer than anyone else: “I beat the waters / With one stroke and another, and turned and glided,” while Allen Mandelbaum gets most caught up in the act itself: “I strike those waters in a thousand ways, / dividing, joining, splashing as I play, / my arms withdrawing, plunging in.” Slavitt turns self-consciously metaphorical: “Naked, / but not thinking about it, I was a child, a fish, / swimming and plunging, floating, enjoying myself.” (Melville’s Arethusa

dropped  
Into the water, plunging to and fro  
In countless twists and turns . . . I flung  
My arms and gaily gambolled there)

None of these quite catches the random flailing of the poet’s own original word order, nor his eight-word succinctness. And none responsibly systematizes Arethusa’s activity in a stroke we can confidently recognize.
An amateur Homeric scholar searched further back in time and literature for me. We both recalled a great deal of swimming in *The Odyssey* but found only one reference. (Odysseus, obeying the first rule of water safety, clings to the wreckage of his boats as long as he can.) In Book V, when Odysseus is shipwrecked, he is urged (according to Robert Fagles) by Leucothea to “strip off those clothes and leave your craft . . . strike out with your arms for landfall there,” but delays doing so until there is nothing left to cling to, and then he “dove headfirst into the sea, stretched his arms and stroked for life itself.” The extension of his arms may be swimming, as Fagles understands it—or it may be the very act of diving, which is also the votive posture of a Greek supplicant, as A. S. Kline translates: Odysseus “arms outstretched plunged into the sea, prepared to swim.”

There must be pictures, both Greek and Roman, of classical swimmers, but I have not seen these.

And ultimately, does it matter? In conversation, Mr. Slavitt mockingly raised this question with me—who cares how Hermaphroditus, or any other actual or mythological ancient, swam? My answer can come only from my own experience as a reader, a translator, and a swimmer. As a reader, I want to know what’s really going on. As a translator, I want to be faithful to my text. As a swimmer, breasting the surf off Nantucket recently, I suddenly noticed that there is a difference which stroke I use. In broken water, I prefer the frontal, visual control of a breaststroke, while in placid water, I like to give myself over to the smooth, powerful draw of a crawl. Let us assume—and this is hardly a rash assumption, in spite of the cultural historians—that Ovid knew everything we know about swimming, and chose deliberately as I would choose. Now the careful reader sees how the stroke is part of the description of the limpid waters in which Hermaphroditus swims. If we know how he is swimming, we know where he is swimming. Poet that he is, Ovid has been telling us more than one thing at once.

But, of course, this interpretation rests on the cultural underpinnings and idiosyncrasies of my own life.³

NOTES:

1. The origin of the word “crawl” is itself a product of literary imagination. As Dr. Phillip Whitten tells the story in his *Complete Book of Swimming* (Random House, 1994): “In 1893 a young man named Harry Wickham . . . learned the stroke while visiting the island of Rubiana. He taught it to his twelve-year-old brother, Alick, who caught the eye of George Farmer, a local swim coach. The story goes that Farmer, astounded by the boy’s speed and his unorthodox technique, exclaimed, ‘Look at that bloke crawling on the water!’”

2. Another non-swimmer would seem to be Richard Lattimore, who has Odysseus as having thrown himself “head first into the water, and with arms spread / stroked as hard as he could.” How a person can stroke “with arms spread” must be a mystery to anyone who has ever tried to move through water, with or without the magic girdle of a goddess.

3. Again, for the record:

   . . . striking  
   His hands against his sides, he leaped and dived  
   Overhand stroke, into the pool . . .  
   —Horace Gregory (Signet, 1958)

   ∞

   The young man, cupping his palms and slapping his torso, swiftly jumped down into the pool. As his arms flashed out in alternate strokes, his body gleamed in the glassy water . . .  
   —David Raeburn (Penguin, 2004)

   ∞

   And after splashing water on his body  
   with his cupped palms, he dives into the pond,  
   and breaks the surface with an easy crawl . . .  