

READING POUND : FIVE

1. MIDNIGHT, and a letter comes to me from our
mistress:
Telling me to come to Tibur, *At once!!*:
Bright tips reach up from twin towers,
Anienan spring water falls into flat-spread pools.
- What *is* to be done about it?
Shall I entrust myself to entangled shadows,
Where bold hands may do violence to my person?
- Yet if I postpone my obedience
because of this respectable terror
I shall be prey to lamentations worse than a nocturnal assailant.
And I shall be in the wrong,
and it will last a twelve month,
For her hands have no kindness me-ward,
- Nor is there anyone to whom lovers are not sacred at
midnight
And in the Via Sciro.
- If any man would be a lover
he may walk on the Scythian coast,
No barbarism would go to the extent of doing him harm,
The moon will carry his candle,
the stars will point out the stumbles,
Cupid will carry lighted torches before him
and keep mad dogs off his ankles.
Thus all roads are perfectly safe
and at any hour;
Who so indecorous as to shed the pure gore of a suitor?!
Cypris is his cicerone.

Ezra Pound, from *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, III; *Homage* was probably written in 1917, first published entire in *Quia Pauper Amavi* (London, October 1919); reprinted in *Collected Shorter Poems* (London, 1952); see also *Poems and Translations*, ed. Sieburth, pp. 530-1, who gives detailed refs to the specific parts of Propertius that Pound used (p. 1305). Sherry, reviewing the shaky evidence for the period of composition, settles however for midsummer 1916 to autumn 1918 (Vincent Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* [Oxford, 2003], p. 314). There are significant textual variants in all printings; I give the 1919 text, to allow comparison with *CSP* (which, e.g., has quotes around lines 4-5 above, as also does *Pers*, though differently arranged). J.P. Sullivan, in his *Ezra Pound and Sextus Propertius: A Study in Creative Translation* (London, 1965), printed a composite text with various

changes authorised by Pound (adopted by *Pers*, see p. 275), but this too is not altogether satisfactory: see K.K. Ruthven, *A Guide to Ezra Pound's 'Personae' (1926)* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), p. 87. For the circumstances of composition and reception see Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character; The Life of Ezra Pound* (London, 1988), pp. 325-44; in the fierce wrangles about accuracy in translation Eliot sat with characteristic prudence upon the fence (Carpenter, p. 344; and compare the original Introduction to Eliot's *Selected Poems* of Pound [1928] with the Postscript of 1948). Sullivan's detailed discussion (pp. 6-10) of the *New Age* review (vol. 26 [1919], p.62), and of Pound's reply, is of note.

On the defensive class-function of Edwardian classical scholarship see Thomas McFarland, *Shapes of Culture* (Iowa City, 1987), Chap. 1 & esp. p. 12, and also Stan Smith, *The Origins of Modernism; Eliot, Pound, Yeats and the Rhetorics of Renewal* [Hemel Hempstead, 1994], pp. 64-6. On the modern emergence of Propertius see Paul Allen Miller, *Subjecting Verses; Latin Love Elegy and the Emergence of the Real* [Princeton, 2004], pp. 102-4. For text-commentary see Ruthven, op. cit., and (more perceptive, but incomplete) Christine Froula, *A Guide to Ezra Pound's 'Selected Poems'* ([New York], 1983), pp. 105-27. On 'bright tips' (above) see Sullivan, p. 88; Carpenter, pp. 330-2; they provoke a pointed critique in Scott Hamilton, *Ezra Pound and the Symbolist Inheritance* (Princeton, 1992): 'Whereas an unchecked aestheticism becomes a critical trap in *Mauberley*, the tough cynicism in *Propertius* harbors an intermittently imagistic sentimentalism which, more often than not, escapes detection' (p. 104; though brief, the whole discussion is challenging). For fuller close examination of Section III, see R.O.A.M. Lyne, *The Latin Love-Poets; from Catullus to Horace* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 133-40; Daniel M. Hooley, *The Classics in Paraphrase; Ezra Pound and Modern Translators of Latin Poetry* (Cranbury, N.J., 1988), pp. 39-44. On a classical version of 'imagism' in Propertius himself, see D. Thomas Benediktson, *Propertius: Modernist Poet of Antiquity* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill., 1989), Chap. 5. For connections between *Homage* and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (London, 1920) see Peter Makin, *Pound's Cantos* (London, 1985), pp. 39-48; Sullivan, pp. 26-34.

Note that 'Tibur' is a town near Rome, not to be confused with the river. On 'no kindness me-ward' note the coy double playfulness. The arch expression is to express archness, as he is the plaything of a coquette, while also sounding like a mannered travesty from a language with complex dative inflections. But also it mimics the archness of biblical translation; compare e.g. Psalm 40 (AV), 'Many, O Lord, my God, are thy wonderful works which thou hast done, and thy thoughts which are to us-ward' (40.5). Even if unconsciously, Pound remembers that the Authorised Version was itself an archaic pastiche, working across a network of earlier versions to codify the idioms of formal speech. His *Homage*, less authorised, has a long and various pedigree.

Judging the tone of this hybrid discourse-style, full of witty affectation and ironical half-parody, was a challenge that Pound evidently relished, though we modern readers have to reconstruct his own peculiar manoeuvres with then-contemporary smart set idiomatics. How easily this may be misjudged can be

seen from the versions set out in *The Complete Elegies of Sextus Propertius*, trans. Vincent Katz (Princeton, 2004), who descends frequently into clumsy, banal posturing: 'What creep would be sprayed by the scant blood of the lover?' (p. 299; see also the translator's comments on 'what we imagine was a street vernacular', p. xvi). The rhapsodic commendation in the back-cover blurb by Robert Creeley reveals bizarre inattention.

Some general problems and aspects of creative literary translation are reviewed in Charles Martindale, *Redeeming the Text; Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (Cambridge, 1993); see esp. Chap. 4: 'Translation as Rereading'. There is a spirited modern translation of the complete text, worthy of comparison; see Propertius, *The poems*, trans. W.G. Shepherd (Penguin Classics; London, 1985), III.16 (p. 121); also, Propertius, *The Poems*, trans. Guy Lee, with Intro. by Oliver Lyne (Oxford, 1994), where the above passage is rendered on pp. 93-4. There is also a spirited growling scepticism over the liberties taken with a deeply defective and corrupted text in J.L. Butrica, 'Editing Propertius', *Classical Quarterly*, 47 (1997), 176-208.

2. The primitive ages sang Venus,
the last sings of a tumult,
And I also will sing war when this matter of a girl is exhausted.
I with my beak hauled ashore would proceed in a more
stately manner,
My Muse is eager to instruct me in a new gamut, or
gambetto,
Up, up my soul, from your lowly cantilation,
put on a timely vigour,

Oh august Pierides! Now for a large-mouthed product.
Thus:
"The Euphrates denies its protection to the Parthian
and apologizes for Crassus,"
And "It is, I think, India which now gives necks
to your triumph,"
And so forth, Augustus. "Virgin Arabia shakes in her
inmost dwelling."
If any land shrink into a distant seacoast,
it is a mere postponement of your domination,
And I shall follow the camp, I shall be duly celebrated,
for singing the affairs of your cavalry.
May the fates watch over my day.

2

Yet you ask on what account I write so many love-lyrics
And whence this soft book comes into my mouth.
Neither Calliope nor Apollo sung these things into my ear,
My genius is no more than a girl.

From *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, V; *Quia Pauper Amavi*, p. 39; compare *Pers*, pp. 212-3, *Poems and Translations*, ed. Sieburth, pp. 533-4. For close discussion of the original for 'The primitive ages . . . my day' (2.10: *Sed tempus lustrare aliis Heliconia choreis*) see H.-P. Stahl, *Propertius: "Love" and "War"; Individual and State under Augustus* (Berkeley, 1985), pp. 156-62 (includes full English translation). Lee (*Poems*) comments that in the Propertian original the boast about the vanquishment of India and Arabia 'is a grotesque exaggeration' (p. 146); but of course; see also Margaret Hubbard, *Propertius* (London, 2001), pp. 101 ff. This whole counter-play of attitudes in Propertius, so relished by Pound, can be seen as self-consciously adept: 'What we have in these poems is a very intricate language game in which the poet, by occupying both sides of the opposition but never being wholly present on either side, inscribes the possibility of a third position that can only be expressed in terms of the simultaneous contradiction between and equivalence of both sides' (Miller, *Subjecting Verses*, p. 133, reducing prismatic irony to a schema--see also pp. 140-3). Section 2 in Pound's arrangement here is collaged in from 2.1.1-4; for context see E. Greene, 'Gender Identity and the Elegiac Hero in Propertius 2.1', *Arethusa*, 33 (2000), 241-61. An exceptionally surprising English precedent to the Poundian *Homage* are the Propertius translations done by Thomas Gray, who for instance renders the final lines, above, in this fashion:

You ask, why thus my Loves I still rehearse,
Whence the soft Strain & ever-melting Verse:
From Cynthia all, that in my numbers shines:
She is my Genius, she inspires the Lines.

Here Calliope gets squeezed out by decorum but, even so, there is a tone of muted obsession in the final line which is surprising only to those who have read Gray only for blandness; compare discussion in Eugene B. McCarthy, *Thomas Gray; The Progress of a Poet* (Madison, N.J., c.1997), pp. 35-41 (the lines quoted here, from Gray's Common-Place Books at Pembroke College, are on p. 38).

'With my beak hauled ashore': after a fancied maritime landing in epic style, Pound's poet will be ready for high eloquence. There are related jokes in Section XII: 'You think you are going to do Homer. / And still a girl scorns the gods', followed by 'Upon the Actian marshes Virgil is Phoebus' chief of police, / He can tabulate Caesar's great ships. / He thrills to Ilian arms (etc; 1919 text). These are the 'Martian generalities' of Section I and they all belong to the inflated formal devices of traditional epic: 'One must have resonance, resonance and sonority ... like a goose' (Sect. XII). Pierides: oratund periphrasis for the Muses in ensemble, because they were reputed to have been born in Pieria. Calliope (= 'beautiful-voiced') was, we recall, the top muse of the nine; she presided over epic poetry and eloquence and was one of Apollo's playmates (compare also Ovid, *Met.* 5.341-661, where she narrates the rape of Persephone); in American usage this is also the name of a raucous fairground steam-organ (e.g. Canto LXXX). She gets into a fight with Truth at the start of the Malatesta story (Canto VIII). But with these jaunty ironies compare the eventual opening of Canto I:

And then went down to the ship,
 Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and
 We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,
 Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also
 Heavy with weeping, so winds from sternward
 Bore us out onward with bellying canvas,
 Circe's this craft, the trim-coiffed goddess. (etc)

In the ur-arrangement of the *Three Cantos*, composed in late 1915 and published in the June, July, and August 1917 numbers of *Poetry* (Chicago), this passage is held back until halfway through Canto III and its voice put into quotation-marks, as 'rough meaning' from the Latin translation of the *Odyssey* by Andreas Divus; for full details and discussion see Ronald Bush, *The Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (Princeton, 1976)--the full text of *Three Cantos* is at pp. 53-73 of Bush, or in *Pers*, pp. 229-45. The postponement of an admitted subject in the grammar of the first two lines, above, is notably counter-epical, and the rude overspill of the iambic pentameter in the second line sets the first heave in first place.

For the composition history in minute detail see Ezra Pound, *Variorum Edition of 'Three Cantos'; A Prototype*, ed. Richard Taylor (Bayreuth, 1991), pp. 56, 57; and more widely, Richard Taylor, 'The Texts of *The Cantos*' in Ira B. Nadel (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound* (Cambridge, 1999), 161-87 and esp. p. 173 (the family tree of development for Canto I, also in Taylor's 'The History and State of the Texts' in Lawrence S. Rainey [ed.], *A Poem Containing History; Textual Studies in 'The Cantos'* [Ann Arbor, Mich., 1997], p. 247). For the trace of development from *Homage* to the *Cantos* see Vincent Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 120-25. For the detour via Divus, see Jerome J. McGann, *Social Values and Poetic Acts; The Historical Judgement of Literary Work* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), pp. 52-6. On the devices of earlier epic overtures see Burton Raffel, 'Translating Medieval European Poetry', in J. Biguenet & R. Schulte (eds), *The Craft of Translation* (Chicago, 1989), pp. 28-53. On love or war as the subject ('arms' in one sense or the other, *amor v. arma*) see also James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage; Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* (New York, 1988), Chap. 4 and esp. pp. 123-7; for the Ovidian precedents see Duncan F. Kennedy, *The Arts of Love; Five Studies in the Discourse of the Roman Love Elegy* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 57-63; for Pound's development of this irony, see Bush, pp. 172-6.

The question in classical historical context has been much debated by scholars: see Stahl, Chap. VIII; Maria Wyke, 'Written Women: Propertius' *Scripta Puella*', *Journ. Roman Stud.*, LXXVII (1987), 47-61, pp. 50-2; Lyne's Introduction to Lee's translations, p. xxi (brief). Larger contexts are developed in Paul Veyne, *Roman Erotic Elegy; Love, Poetry, and the West* (Chicago, 1988), on which also see Maria Wyke in *Journ. Roman Stud.*, LXXIX (1989), 165-73 and her *The Roman Mistress* (Oxford, 2002), and (especially on Propertius and Ovid) Sharon L. James, *Learned Girls and Male Persuasion; Gender and Reading in Roman Love Elegy* (Berkeley, Cal., 2003). The modern implications of split cultural loyalties and divided structures are summarised thus by Stan Smith: 'The desire for coherence is the epic delusion of Modernism. The acknowledgement that it doesn't cohere, that diversity cannot be reduced to

uniformity, is its saving grace' (*The Origins of Modernism*, p. 60). Pound's reaction against an ethic of formal coherence, and a similar reaction of Propertius before him, are discussed by Benediktson, *Propertius: Modernist Poet of Antiquity*, pp. 29-30.

3. In how many varied embraces, our changing arms,
Her kisses, how many, lingering on my lips.
"Turn not Venus into a blinded motion,
Eyes are the guides of love,
Paris took Helen naked coming from the bed of Menelaus,
Endymion's naked body, bright bait for Diana,
--such at least is the story.

While our fates twine together, sate we our eyes with love;
For long nights come upon you
and a day when no day returns.
Let the gods lay chains upon us
so that no day shall unbind them.

From *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, VII, rendering II.15; *Quia Pauper Amavi*, p. 42 (the 1934 printing closes the quotation-mark after *Diana*, as also *CSP, Pers* and *Poems and Translations*, ed. Sieburth, p. 537); compare Lee, *Poems*, pp. 43-4. Note how T.S. Eliot's approving reference to Propertius is to the maturity of his disillusion and disgust, choosing to overlook this lyrical-erotic element altogether (Clark Lecture V [1929]; *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. R. Schuchard [London, 1993], p. 145). The 'story' at least of Endymion nicely captures the playful narcissism of sensual legend; the pretty boy chooses perpetual sleep as safeguard of his youthful bloom, so that his lover Diana must every night gaze fervently upon his motionless allure; one way to stoke up a romantic narrative, and a chill reminder of long empty nights to come. Pounds's close recreation of the interwoven ring-structure of repeated words and sounds in the Propertian original is outlined in Benediktson, *Propertius: Modernist Poet of Antiquity*, pp. 74-7.

On the 'new woman' in late Republican Rome see Sullivan, pp. 48ff--but he is obtuse in tracing this element in the *Homage*; see also intro. to Shepherd's translation (op. cit.), pp. 10-12, and for a more sophisticated discussion, Maria Wyke, 'Reading Female Flesh: *Amores* 3.1' in Averil Cameron, *History as Text; The Writing of Ancient History* (London, 1989). On the 'new woman' in Pound's own time and circle of contacts, see Bruce Clarke, 'Dora Marsden and Ezra Pound: *The New Freewoman* and "The Serious Artist"', *Contemp. Lit.*, XXXIII (1992), 91-112. Yeats included 'A Thought from Propertius' in his *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919); a fragment casually reducing an image of noble womanhood to 'fit spoil for a centaur', Minerva ravished by a drunken brute (so much for Maude Gonne and John MacBride, perhaps: 'fit' nodding in a blend of coercive destiny with implied eugenics). Pound's insouciant treatment of sexual raillery as a form of radical critique infuses an erotic charge into the actions of translation itself; on the challenge to representation

of an implicitly sexualised vocabulary see Kennedy, *Arts of Love*, esp. Chap. 2, and David Fredrick, 'Reading Broken Skin: Violence in Roman Elegy', in Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (eds), *Roman Sexualities* (Princeton, 1997), pp. 172-93, esp. p. 182 (here the emphasis on invasive sexual voyeurism is not, however, a Poundian theme).

Pound's later acknowledgement of his larger motives at this moment includes a strong war-time, anti-imperial component: 'it presents certain emotions as vital to me in 1917, faced with the infinite and ineffable imbecility of the British Empire, as they were to Propertius some centuries earlier, when faced with the infinite and ineffable imbecility of the Roman Empire. These emotions are defined largely, but not entirely, in Propertius' own terms' (letter to the *English Journal*, Rapallo, 24 January 1931; *Letters*, ed. D.D. Paige, p. 231). For the suggestion of a direct comparison here with *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, in 'theme and technique', see Jo Brantley Berryman, *Circe's Craft; Ezra Pound's 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley'* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1983), pp. 31-2. For the justice of the comparison between these two eras, late-classical and modern, see Sullivan, pp. 75-6; Smith, pp. 71-4. The literal connection between empires in *Homage* is disputed by Davie (*Pound* [1975], p. 50), but then reasserted (p. 61) at the level of style.

See also here Niall Rudd, *The Classical Tradition in Operation* (Toronto, c.1994), Chap. 5: 'Pound and Propertius: Two Former Moderns' (pp. 117-50), and Appendix: 'Professor Hale and *Homage* as a Document of Cultural Transition' (pp. 151-8). On the war question see also Katz, *Complete Elegies*, pp. xxxvii-xl; a full and nuanced overview is found in Vincent Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 111-120, 342-3.

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PDF file created on 20 August 2007