

Entrusted to "Entangled Shadows": The Danger of Tradition in Ezra Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius*

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Ezra Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius* is notably less satisfying than the same author's *Cathay*.¹ Both present the difficulty of being strange kinds of translations: the translations of *Cathay* derive from Pound's reception of an American scholar's study of Japanese translations of ancient Chinese poems, and the pieces forming the *Homage* are jumbings of various bits of Propertius' elegies translated with apparent errors. Perhaps the relative dissatisfaction of reading the *Homage* results from the reader's proximity to Propertius and distance from China: most readers, even today, have a sense of what Ancient Roman lyric should be

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1 All references to Pound's poetry follow Richard Sieburth's *New Selected Poems and Translations*, 2010.

like, and can form their own ideas from reading it, while ancient China and its language remain rather remote. But there is more to the difference than that inability to judge Chinese well; Pound attacks the reader's expectations differently in the two works. In *Cathay* the reader shares with Pound a vague but still informative sense of ancient China, and the imagery all seems to fit in with that picture very well: autumnal rivers and all we expect to see in smoky Chinese paintings. The main discomfort of early readers of *Cathay* would have been caused by Pound's radical innovation in poetic language, his substitution of a modern Imagist style for the decadent lyrics of the nineteenth-century translators. To readers today, however, Pound's translations are likely to sound just right, comfortable to those mostly familiar with haiku.

The *Homage*, on the other hand, remains uncomfortable, and those whom Pound might lead back to Propertius are likely to want to stay with Propertius and closer translations, and forget Pound. After all, Pound threatens the whole tone to which they are accustomed, in a much more profound way than he challenged the falsely poetic diction of early translators from Chinese: that is, Pound is changing the shared image, the sounds and tones we expect in Propertius. Propertius' text is also quite different from the Chinese: there is a single author working in the Latin elegies, and managing his presence in a complex way; furthermore, these poems do not offer the possibility of the pure, tranquil imagery that Pound found in the *Cathay* poems, where there is less dialogue and none of the radical change of scene and voice between nonetheless intimately related poems, as in Propertius. This is all the more problematic because Pound in the *Homage* focuses precisely on that authorial presence, as he tries to establish some sense of its stability, its immortality.

When Fenollosa's widow sent Pound a manuscript of poems and poetic theory—eventually *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*—Pound found something that would serve well as the platform for a broader stylistic reconfiguration; but Pound sought ought Propertius on his own to satisfy some need that went beyond imagery. Sullivan credits Pound's interest to two types of factors, literary and cultural. Pound saw in Propertius a type of poetry, and of irony, that he needed; and he saw a kindred spirit facing similarly difficult cultural situations. Sullivan cites two useful letters of Pound: "The value being

that the Roman poets are the only ones we know of who had approximately the same problems we have. The metropolis, the imperial posts to all corners of the known world. ... The Greeks had no world outside, no empire, metropolis, etc. etc." and "[the *Homage*] presents certain emotions 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."² In other words, Pound's engagement with Propertius is much less innocent than his encounter with the Chinese.

But Propertius' attraction was also more personal, for Pound and for others of our day. As Conte puts it: "His peculiar combination of technical refinement, imagistic complexity, unpredictable sequences of thought, erudition, and suffering tends to make readers nervous, which is one reason why contemporary audiences find him, like Catullus, one of the most congenial of all Latin poets."³ In 1917, Pound certainly shared that nervousness, above all regarding the connection between poetry and the public (and the regime). As he stood on the verge of writing the first *Cantos*, Pound discovered a kindred nervousness in the Roman poet who most clearly distinguished himself from the conventional epic mode, without merely shirking it for some amorous diversion. He found a poet struggling in the terms of elegiac love poetry with the basic questions of the survival of poetry and the poet in the face of a crumbled world and a crumbling self, and of the capacity for the formation and transmission of culture.

Pound faces a new challenge, then, in translating Propertius: not just the words, but Propertius himself—the particular poet's engagement with his poetry amid all the pressures of love and history—needs to be preserved in the translation. Hooley duly notes that Pound wants to transmit not merely a verbal but a personal presence when translating, to the point that "Pound and Propertius speak with a single voice in the *Homage*. For a time...Pound *is* Propertius."⁴ Hooley shows that Pound attempts to "translate as Propertius himself might have translated" by allowing the tone he perceives in Propertius' text to govern also the very

2 J. P. Sullivan, "Ezra Pound and the Classics," 229–221.

3 Gian Biaggio Conte, *Latin Literature: A History*, 338.

4 Daniel M. Hooley, "Pound's Propertius, Again," 1030.

way that he translates.⁵ That is to say, the distortion of the Latin words, obvious to a reader who can follow the Latin, actually transmits a more essential quality of the Latin poem, its tone and feel. But this complex texture of Pound's translation does not eliminate the distinction between the translator and the translated. Pound does not pretend that his translation can achieve the absolute possession of another's poetic *persona*, "the complete Propertius," but admits the distance inherent in translation and makes of it a subtle, driving theme. In fact, Pound insists on this distance in the very title, *Homage to Sextus Propertius*. Ruthven cites a letter in which Pound compares this title with Debussy's title "Hommage à Rameau" from his 1905 collection of short piano works, *Images*.⁶ It is a piece based on a melody of the great Baroque composer Rameau, but so totally imbued with Debussy's character that it flawlessly fits in with the other compositions, all based on visual images. In other words, in that "Hommage" Debussy remains the main creative character. Likewise, in Pound's *Homage*, in addition to the self-effacement of the poet acting *in persona Propertii* there remains the active force of the distinction between the two poets. Pound needs us to notice that distance at some subtle level because it becomes the same as the varying distance between the lovers in the poems, as love is made into art and text. Thus the *Homage to Sextus Propertius* is not merely an exercise in a particular poetic style and voice, but also as an engagement with the creative distance between the love poet and the object of desire as a mirror of the creative, unifying distance between translator and original text, between the present and the past with which it longs to live.

My goal is to show that this dynamic separation is the foundation of the meaning of Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius*. As long as the *Homage* is a mere representation, it is a failure: we would rather have Propertius in the original. The main goal of criticism of the *Homage* has been to get past this feeling of failure. To do so one must see that the *Homage*, to work, must be more than a dead poetic rite: it must be an act of vivid memory whose force derives from the translator's mirroring of the distance between love poet and beloved in the very relationship he establishes as translator to the text remembered. The

5 Ibid., 1035.

6 K. K. Ruthven, *A Guide to Ezra Pound's Personae* (1926), 87.

translation is not a clear window into a past age, but a conscious expression of continuity and inheritance, not just a recollection but a memory that changes the one who commemorates it. In fact, the reflective distance between Pound and Propertius is already present in Propertius' text, as the ancient poet transcends himself in looking toward his relationship to his lover, his art, his society, and to his very life, in the face of the constant risk of oblivion—death and being forgotten—"forgetability." This congruency in the relationships between, first, Propertius and his art, and then between Pound and Propertius, is reflected again in our participation in Pound's work as readers, called not to judge Pound as part of our past but to engage with him in a meditation on the meaning of poetic inheritance. The lover exposes himself to many dangers in loving, but finds himself almost deified; the love poet faces the danger of an inferior theme, but establishes his own true path to the Muses; Pound runs risks in translating Propertius, but attains a better hold on the complexity of ancient Western poetic tradition; and the reader of Pound finds himself involved in the same joyful danger of entrusting himself to the shadows of loss and recovery as the language itself transforms to show that eager instability of real love and poetry.

A step toward explaining this is to look at some of the most "disastrous" moments in Pound's work *qua* translation—the howlers—because in these moments the attempts at replicating Propertius' ironic play, in itself untranslatable, show up the risk of total dissolution. As a preliminary note, however: to take the *Homage* as a candidate for examination as a translation of Propertius is wrong-headed from the start, and the entire scholarly game of discussing the problem seems only now to be getting past the issues raised by the contemptuous early critics like Hale. The title itself already should raise a classicist's eye-brow: What homage does Propertius need from Ezra Pound? More importantly, Pound uses only a small fraction of the work of Propertius, letting the difficulties of Book IV go unnoticed, and many of the sections of his *Homage* are composed of verses taken here and there from different elegies. Even though the ordering and division of Propertius' text is a matter of scholarly debate, Pound's work does not even qualify as an attempt to address the text of Propertius in a complete way. Yet it is still worthwhile to look at the way he translates what he does translate, since

almost all of his text comes somehow from Propertius, and it may well be true that he discovered some ironic tone previously unnoticed by the worshippers of Horace and Vergil. Even so, the critic no longer needs to spend time defending Pound in an irrelevant battle. Thus, I want to look merely at the poetic effect of some of his “howlers.”

In the words spoken by Calliope in section II, Pound writes,

Obviously crowned lovers at unknown doors,
Night dogs, the marks of a drunken scurry,
These are your images ... (50–52)

“Night dogs” is a mistake for the word *canes*, which can mean dogs, but in the Latin of elegy 3.3.48 means “you will sing,” in something like, “You will sing of the drunken signs of late-night flight.”⁷ Pound has thus reproduced a well-known student error by swapping “sing” for “dog,” but in doing so he has actually produced a new image: the disheveled lovers at other people’s doors are like dogs howling to be let inside. Thus, in some sense, Pound could justify his error for the sake of poetry, and note that the Latin text itself has precisely this confusing resonance: any Latin speaker, when he hears the word *canes*, may immediately think of dogs. But Pound also lets the reader know that the Latin is endangered, and he seems to ask, “Does it matter that I do it this way? Is anything lost?” A few lines later, at 3.3.52, he translates *rigavit* with “stiffened,” allowing its normal meaning of “sprinkle” to be affected by the phonic proximity of the English word “rigid”; and stiffening might be precisely the effect on our face when the Muse splashes cold water on us. Thus, in instances like these, Pound exposes the reader to the potential waywardness of Latin itself and especially of Latin as heard by an English reader. But neither is a poetic failure.

In the second part of section V, the speaker offers a list of items excluded from what would be his kind of epic, if he had one. The last item in the sequence is “Welsh mines and the profit Marus had out of them” (48), for Propertius’ “*Cimbrorumque minas et benefacta Marii*” (2.1.24), a reference to barbarian threats and the good deeds of Marius. Pound seems to have reacted to the resemblance between the *Cimbri* and

7 All references to Propertius’ elegies follow E.A Barber’s 2nd edition of the Oxford text, *Sexti Properti Carmina*, 1960.

the Latin name of Wales, *Cambria/Cumbria*, noted the presence of mines in Wales and the phonic similarity between "mines" and *minas* ("threats"), and decided to draw in the separate reference to Marius. Pound thus introduces an absurdity into the poem, namely that Welsh mining business might be material for an epic, material that he must disown. Perhaps Pound is trying to imitate the speaker's attitude toward epic in his very style of translating, which is equally carefree. Or perhaps Pound's often surprising economic concerns in politics have come into play. But there is a further effect: this absurdity in English, which makes sense only if referred to the Latin, shows up the fragility of the Latin and the ease with which much of it can be lost in translation. At the same time, the speaker is asking about what is really necessary to a poem:

I should remember Caesar's affairs ...

for a background,

Although Callimachus did without them. (49–52)

The translator makes it seem that the speaker himself has lost hold of the material that he does not care about—producing not a play on words, but a play on tone—while simultaneously raising the question of whether it matters at all that these proper names like *Cimbri* and *Marius* be understood correctly.

In an example from section XII, this interaction of what the Latin poet says, what the English translator hears, and what he then writes, shifts decidedly in favor of the English. Here the speaker is berating Lynceus because his poetry falls short of the seductive escapade he has begun with Propertius' lover. The speaker treats Vergil lightly in the Latin—*nescio quid maius nascitur Iliade* (2.34b.66), "Some I-don't-know-what greater than the Iliad is being born"—but Pound gives us more, translating the word *custodis* just above in line 59 (referring to Phoebus) as "Upon the Actian marshes Virgil is Phoebus' chief of police," going on to add to his comment on the *Aeneid's* construction the parenthesis "(and to Imperial order)" (32, 40). Perhaps Pound is bringing out a satire left subtle in the original; but to do so is to change such a thing radically, even if the result is not absurd (which it is not). The English speaker seems more concerned with calling names than making sense. But to the reader with small Latin, it is more obvious that the translator has used words referring to modern experience: the English writer's awareness

What *is* to be done about it?

Shall I entrust myself to entangled shadows,
Where bold hands may do violence to my person? (6–8)

The poet wants to write love poetry, but the path to the lover is dark and dangerous, and though he at first proposes that lovers are protected at night (15–27), he immediately imagines the possibility of death and even models his tomb (28–38). Section IV brings the speaker to an emotional extreme of feverish desire for words:

Much conversation is as good as having a home.
Out with it, tell it to me, all of it, from the beginning,
I guzzle with outstretched ears. (10–12)

But this confusing anxiety about words and the truth of Lygdamus' report concludes with the speaker's doubt: "And you expect me to believe this / after twelve months of discomfort?" (42–43). The love poetry of III is itself a dialogue called into doubt, leading into the solemn words opening V, "Now if ever it is time to cleanse Helicon" (1). The speaker warms himself up to writing something greater, but shrinks away from it, boldly denying his divine inspiration: "Neither Calliope nor Apollo sung these things into my ear, / My genius is no more than a girl" (27–28). In beautiful terms he ascribes his inspiration and self-definition to the very object of his poetry, and then distances himself from epic material, concluding, in the third part of section V, that "it is noble to die of love" (62).

Pound's speaker has only just arrived at a very limited poetic self-confidence. In III, the speaker is moved to his reflection by the arrival of a letter at midnight; Pound too has received his midnight invitation from Propertius, and to arrive at that consummation which is also "obedience" (9) he must entrust himself to "entangled shadows." These sections show us a desire for love, words, and genius endangered by fear of death, and by its parallel, poetic incapacity: "It is noble to die of love," noble to fail as a love poet, noble to translate. Pound is working with the instability of the poetic identity in the first sections. In VI and VII, then, death and the possibility of memory and immortality come to the fore.

VI is a poem of death and separation encompassing not only the two lovers, but in them the whole of human life, encompassing even the figures of the "epic" world:

When, when, and whenever death closes our eyelids,
Moving naked over Acheron
Upon the one raft, victor and conquered together,
Marius and Jugurtha together,
one tangle of shadows. (67–71)

Cynthia and Propertius are like Marius and Jugurtha, like "victor and conquered," all joined naked on the one raft of the underworld. This underworld is figured here as the same threatening "tangle of shadows" that was placed between Propertius' house and his lover's door in section III. In the evocation of his own funeral that follows, the speaker acknowledges his lover's perseverance in following him: "Nor will you be weary of calling my name, nor too weary / To place the last kiss on my lips" (89–90). But Pound leads us beyond that last kiss as he gives us the speaker's words:

You, sometimes, will lament a lost friend
For it is a custom:
This care for past men,

Since Adonis was gored in Idalia, and the Cytherean
Ran crying with out-spread hair,
In vain, you call back the shade,
In vain, Cynthia. Vain call to unanswering shadow,
Small talk comes from small bones. (96–103)

Here Propertius is made to address Pound as much as Cynthia, Pound as the poet "lamenting a lost friend," in what may seem an empty ritual: he invokes its vanity three times in swift succession, calling into question the ability to "call to unanswering shadow," precisely the task Pound has set himself—"Shades of Callimachus, Coan ghosts of Philetas...". If in the frantic dialogue with Lygdamus we hear "To say many things is equal to having a home," here we arrive at the opposite reality, "Small talk comes from small bones." Separation seems final, negating love and the power of words.

Oh, oh, and enough of this,
by dew-spread caverns,
The Muses clinging to the mossy ridges;
to the ledge of the rocks. (29–32)

And “Even there, no escape” he concludes (37). The Muses stand in a precarious position and offer the lover no firm hold on his life; they overcome the separation not of death, but of rejection.

The closing section, then, brings Propertius to his healing and immortality. It begins as a harangue against Lynceus who has tried to take Propertius’ girl, but given the interlacing of love and poetry, it rapidly shifts into a critique of Lynceus’ writing and the various modes, the epic (with some jabs at Vergil) and then pastoral (with a jab at Wordsworth). The speaker contents himself with his limited fame: “I shall triumph among young ladies of indeterminate character, / My talent acclaimed in their banquets” (57–58). But he is not healed: “And the god strikes to the marrow” (59). The *Homage* concludes with these lines noting the death of poets and their separation from their lovers, as they become written monuments:

Varro sang Jason’s expedition,
Varro, of his great passion Leucadia,
There is song in the parchment; Catullus the highly indecorous,
Of Lesbia, known above Helen;
And in the dyed pages of Calvus,
Calvus mourning Quintilia,
And but now Gallus had sung of Lycoris,
Fair, fairest Lycoris—
The waters of Styx poured over the wound:
And now Propertius of Cynthia, taking his stand among these. (67–76)

The speaker eschews bold claims to divinization: he sets himself among mortal poets, relying for more than that on books and commemoration, actualized in Pound’s work. Though separated from Cynthia he remains “Propertius of Cynthia,” and it is Pound who sings the song found “in the parchment” and “in the dyed pages.”

The *Homage* is emphatically not a translation or historical-critical re-presentation of an ancient poet. Pound knows that he stands in the

presence of Propertius, but it is a past presence, a spectral presence to be evoked in prayer, his to be reached only by traversing a space of shadows: passing through "entangled shadows" to reach the "shades," the "unanswering shadows." At all times Pound evokes that danger, intimately known to all lovers, of receiving no answer. Poetic tradition is not a matter of replication, nor is total possession of Propertius' *persona* possible—the mask is not the face. Thus, although Pound's *poem* successfully evokes the presence of Propertius, Pound's *work* goes further, acknowledging the separation, the possibility of loss, of corruption, of disintegration—an acknowledgement that makes his success at once more tenuous and precious. Pound's success with the shades is partial from the beginning, but in spite of this inevitable and frequently elaborated difficulty and danger, Pound will be satisfied with partial success, with finding only those parts that really carry through from the past: partiality and mortality are an accepted part of the continuum that Pound constructs with the past. He found a beautiful expression of the fragility of life and love in Propertius, and he used it to express the fragility of poetic tradition. This concern with the coherence of culture must be the basis of any understanding of this *Homage*, for Pound is refining not only his poetic technique but also his sense of where poetry is going, of its relationship to death and the question of the consistency of human life and culture as a whole. He certainly did not think that the *Homage to Sextus Propertius* would be his last work. For Propertius, life, love, and death all join most concretely in a new kind of epic art; Pound needed his blessing before he could go on. There is irony, but also urgency.

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