

# The Classics in Paraphrase

*Ezra Pound and Modern Translators  
of Latin Poetry*

Daniel M. Hooley



Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press  
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Associated University Presses  
440 Forsgate Drive  
Cranbury, NJ 08512

Associated University Presses  
25 Sicilian Avenue  
London WC1A 2QH, England

Associated University Presses  
2133 Royal Windsor Drive  
Unit 1  
Mississauga, Ontario  
Canada L5J 1K5

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American  
National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials  
Z39.48-1984.

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hooley, Daniel M.  
The classics in paraphrase.

Bibliography: p.  
Includes index.

1. Pound, Ezra, 1875-1972—Influence. 2. Pound, Ezra,  
1875-1972. Homage to Sextus Propertius. 3. Latin poetry—  
Translations into English—History and criticism.  
4. English poetry—Translations from Latin—History and  
criticism. 5. Latin language—Translating into English.  
6. Latin poetry—Paraphrases, tales, etc.—History and  
criticism. 7. Poetry—Translating. I. Title.  
PS3531.082Z648 1988 811'.52 86-43216  
ISBN 0-941664-82-1 (alk. paper)

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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## Preface

MY notion as I began writing this little study was simply to examine translation as a means toward further understanding the role of classical models and influences in the development of modern poetry. Of course, with respect to the original poems of our major moderns, Pound, Eliot, Yeats, and the rest, uses of classical material had long been examined, *satis superque*. But I had come to feel that, with regard to the *general* perception of the classics in the long-ago days of nascent modernism, the very achievement of our preeminent poets, their singular creative accomplishment, tended to leave spectacular but ultimately false trails for critics to follow. Or trails leading to only partial truth. Translation, on the other hand, requires compromise, a muting of even a great and indomitable creative voice, in the service of some hoped-for synthesis, a joined and balanced articulation. The translator attends to his original, thinks about his relation to a classical poem and its meaning and pertinence in a changed world. That attention and thought, when it is exercised by the finest of our poets, offers intrinsic rewards to our scrutiny while deepening our understandings of the development of technique and idea in modern verse.

It might have been a happy chore, then, just to rummage through the myriad classical translations of our century's poets, and to try to make some sense of their ambitions and attainments. But Pound seems to have been right about great ages of literature coinciding with great ages of translation, and I was faced with a fearsome array of important works. In hasty retreat, I opted for something more modest: to begin on familiar ground by reexamining Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius* and to consider the "influence" (very broadly conceived) of that poem and its author among later translations of divers poets—though necessarily limited to a very few translations by a very few poets. This has not proved to be an occasion for setting out a systematic tabulation of translation techniques initiated by Pound and carried on by successors. That kind of study, however useful, might paint a distorting picture—giving Pound credit for a number of technical innovations not his at all (most of Pound's techniques are inherited) and casting others in the giant's shadow (for a generally well-done study of this nature, however, I can recommend Ronnie Apter's *Digging for the Treasure: Translation after Pound* [New York: Peter Lang, 1984]). The poets I discuss here are all well able to think for themselves and are not inclined to facile mimetic

reaction; a few, in fact, think poorly of Pound. So we are faced with a situation considerably less neat but ultimately more interesting: that of a compulsive and ingenious translator doing something provocative with an ancient poem, which in turn has made others think about what they can do and how to go about it. And that, taken in sum, sheds a broad and general light not only on the relations of classical and modern literatures, but on the creative process as well; for these translators have made poems.

I have written the essays that follow from a literate layman's point of view, roughly that of Woolf's "common reader" (slightly the better if he or she has run across a little Latin in the course of life). Which means that specialists in classics or modern literature will find much of what I say elementary—particularly in my introduction. But since there are few specialists in both, the discussion may serve some purpose in establishing a common ground, a frame of mind, that can enable thinking about both literatures and their worlds together. To say that such mediating terms are more important to us, as readers and humans, than any circumscribed expertise may to some betray a nostalgic turn of mind. That is as may be, but I persist in contending that such terms do allow us, when we let them, a view of ourselves *through* time and thus present a fuller understanding of where we have come and how we have got here—some more complete sense of our humane culture. That sense, turned back to the poetry itself, demonstrates both the profound distance between classical and contemporary sensibilities and, paradoxically, the crucial perception that classical reading can thrive on (may need) the attention of a fertile and active modern imagination. My introductory chapter, in its desultory fashion, seeks, then, to provide one sort of commonality for questioning and thinking about these matters, while the ensuing chapters fill out our view with more focused literary analysis.

One kind of specialized talk will not be found much in evidence here. While my subject is translation and how writers think through and about it, I have not attempted to undertake a serious discussion of translation theory—though I do now and again make reference to theoretical ideas that I think are useful and fitting in a particular poetic circumstance. My conviction is that that is as far as any practical literary critic can go in a study of this kind without resigning a useful and healthy skepticism. Which is, of course, not to suggest that there may not be in the discussion that follows some ideas that impinge upon theory. One difference being that they will have been distilled through texts rather than received from on high. My bibliography will point those interested in the other side of things in some of the right directions.

One final point: although I have written this book for general readers—those interested in more than just classical poetry—I have refrained from offering my own translations of Latin and Greek passages lest they interfere, in the reader's eye, with the primary tension between original poem and

version under discussion. A few short quotations remain untranslated, though they should be accessible to anyone with even a little Latin or the curiosity to look them up in a good translation, something more than the uninspiring crib I would, of necessity, offer. I hope few will be dismayed by such a procedure.

My debts are far too many to number here. I should at least begin by thanking my teachers and friends in classics and English literature. Among those, Thomas Clayton, Philip Furia, Elizabeth Belfiore, John Miller, George Sheets, and Robert Sonkowsky, have offered constant and intelligent support. Clay Jenkinson has turned his keen mind to parts of this, found some wanting, and gently let me know. W. R. Johnson has offered helpful criticism and generous encouragement, and J. P. Sullivan's acute scrutiny has eliminated several mistakes from the manuscript. Peter Firchow, though tolerant of my idiosyncracies of style and odd taste in poetry, has been my best and fiercest critic and has set me right countless times; the good bits here are his. The bad, all mine in impious despite.

I am happy to acknowledge the kindness of the following authors and publishers who have allowed me to reprint copyrighted material: Oxford University Press (Porter, Bunting), Jonathan Cape (Zukofsky), Ohio University Press (Cunningham), New Directions and Faber and Faber (Pound), Palmer Bovie, James Michie, University of Michigan Press (Rexroth), University of Texas Press (J. P. Sullivan's text of Pound's *Homage*). I must thank, too, the editors of *MLN*, *Sagetrieb*, and *Classical and Modern Literature* for permission to publish here what appeared there in other form.



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