Omaggio a Sesto Properzio by Ezra Pound

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phasis on the notion of “human” when arguing with the physicalists), but disagreements are also what go into the making of a book that deserves to be read and discussed.

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Omaggio a Sesto Propertio
By Ezra Pound
Ed. and trans. by Massimo Bacigalupo
Genoa: Edizioni S. Marco dei Giustinianni, 1984

Massimo Bacigalupo, author of The Formed Trace: The Later Poetry of Ezra Pound (L’ultimo Pound, winner of the Viareggio Prize for nonfiction in 1982), has turned his attention to Pound’s earlier work. His edition of Homage to Sextus Propertius contains the English text and first Italian translation, an historical and critical introduction, an annotated selection of letters and criticism (1916-1979), explanatory notes, and a list of textual variants (not easily come by elsewhere).

The introduction focuses on the linguistic relations between Pound’s text and the Propertian original, tactfully characterized as an “ambiguous fidelity.” Bacigalupo helpfully places the poem within the context of Pound’s career. Composed in 1917-18, it is a transitional work that combines the Imagist and Vorticist virtues (image as “radiant node”; “planes of relation”) of Lustra (1916) while announcing the more variable dramatic tone, narrative juxtaposition, and visionary historical spaciousness of the Urcantos and The Cantos, already under way. But if Pound “presses the organ pedal” in Homage, he knows how to back off his rhetoric “with a grimace,” a tribute to his “vigilance” or aesthetic tact. In this sense Pound loses his sense of proportion—and worse—from time to time in The Cantos.

Bacigalupo succeeds admirably in conveying the contrary moods, voices, and qualities that critics have found in Homage: its “technical expertise” (Blackmur), “sensuousness” (Fraser), and “wit” (Dekker); “an ideal of civilized intelligence” (Perkins); its deliberate “translatorese” (Davie) of a “scolaretto” (Bacigalupo); its “polyvalence,” “contrasting styles,” the “reduction of elegiac and mythological elements in Latin culture to commonplace, joke, cliché,” the “elegant brio” that unifies the tone of the sequence (D’Agostino)—one could reconstruct High Modernist poetics on the basis of this “per-version” (Ruthven) of Propertius. Chiefly Bacigalupo aims for directness and clarity, sometimes achieving his end with an almost word-for-word translation:

I shall have, doubtless, a boom after my funeral
Seeing that long standing increases all things regardless of quality.

Avrò di sicuro un boom a funerali fatti,
Visto che l’antichità accresce tutto indipendentemente dalla qualità.

(23-25)

Bacigalupo does not overplay his hand: “Out-weariers of Apollo” (10) becomes simply “Gli estenuatori di Apollo.” In its ninetyish way Pound’s “veiled flood of Acheron” impresses with its dark foreboding, the linguistic equivalent of Sibelius’ Swan of Tuonela. Bacigalupo’s “flutti velati” serves well, even if it cannot catch the archaism of “flood.” Elsewhere he translates “flood” by “La piena” in “The flood shall move toward the fountain/Ere
love know moderations’’ (337-38)—a
different kind of flood.

Homage illustrates Pound’s logopoeia: “a play in the shading of the words themselves.” Logopoeia “employs
words not only for their direct meaning,” wrote Pound, “but it takes count
in a special way of habits of usage, of
the context we expect to find with the
word.” One of Ruthven’s examples
occurs in the line “And expound the
distentions of Empire” where the “dis­
tentions are distentions because the
empire is already too big.” Finding the
logopoetic equivalent in Italian for
many phrases proved Bacigalupo’s
hardest task. His “le distese” for “dis­
tentions” works the effect in Italian.
For unsuitable in “Helen’s conduct is
‘unsuitable’” (276), however, he gives
“sconveniente.” Since “suitor” has
already appeared (155) and Pound
places “unsuitable” in quotation marks
(to catch—and play with—the tone of
snobbish disdain), the logopoeia
emerges in the recovery of the ever-ad­
miring suitors—which does not come
through “sconveniente.” (At the
same time, as J. P. Sullivan has re­
marked, “certain sorts of irrational pun
can only bring out such logopoeia if we
have the adventitious aid of a [Latin]
text before us to see the play on
words.”)

Pound mixes words derived from
Latin (and Greek) with words of Anglo­
Saxon origin, creating powerful sonic
and satiric effects:

Persephone and Dis, Dis, have mercy upon her,
There are enough women in hell, quite
enough beautiful women
Iope, and Tyro, and Pasiphae, and the
formal girls of Achaia,
And out of Troad, and from the Campania,
Death has his tooth in the lot
Avernus lusts for the lot of them
(407-13)

The Italian lacks or seems to lack the
equivalent medley of diversely derived
sounds (“Vi sono abbastanza donne
all’inferno” and “La morte mette dente
su tutte”). Lines in which Pound plays
off the original Latin and uses English
words derived mainly from Latin will
lose some of their oddness when
turned into Italian:

And my ventricles do not palpitate to
Caesarial ore rotundos

Poi i miei ventricoli non pal­
pitano all’ore rotundo cesareo (266)

The word “acquire” in “The Parthians
shall get used to our statuary/and ac­
cquire a Roman religion” works off “get
used to,” the colloquial expression.
(285-86) As David Perkins comments,
the logopoetic effect is

felt not only in the individual phrases (“get
used to” suggests the boredom of imperial
statuary; “acquire” is delicate irony . . . by
euphemism, since the “acquisition” will
come not by conquest but by being con­
quered) but in the “play” between the
phrases: moving from the native and col­
loquial “get used” to the Latinate “acquire,”
the shading of the diction wittily reflects the
process of conquest and acculturation. (His­
tory of Modern Poetry, 1:471)

Bacigalupo does his best with “I Parti
faranno l’abitudine alla nostra
staturia,e si procureranno una re­
ligione latina.”

Sometimes a word of the original
drops from sight. “We have kept our
erasers in order” (12) quietly declares
an article of “aesthetic” ideology and
High Modernist faith. Erasers—Prop­
erius wrote pumice, from pumex =
pumice stone—stand for refinement ad
unguem. Like all poetic “things,” they
are “in order” in the poem. We do not
quite “see” them in “Per parte nostra
sappiamo cancellare.” Elsewhere Bacigalupo
defends his choice on the
basis of emphasizing the noi as op­
posed to the “Out-weariers of Apollo”
(see Bacigalupo, “‘Per parte nostra
sappiamo cancellare’: al lavoro su due
poemetti di Pound,” *Il verri*, no. 12 [Sept. 1986], 71-72). But if Bacigalupo’s “straziato” cannot convey the shock of “scarified,” he captures the pathos and dignity of the passage:

You will follow the bare scarified breast
Nor will you be weary of calling my name,
nor too weary
To place the last kiss on my lips
When the Syrian onyx is broken.
Seguirai il petto nudo straziato
E non ti stancherai di chiamare il mio nome,
non sarai troppo stanca
Per porre l’ultimo bacio sulle mie labbra
Quando l’onice sira si spezza.

“Scarify” (to scar, to cut, to criticize severely) derives from the Greek *scariphasthai*, to scratch an outline, to sketch; it is related to *scribe*—another example of logopoëia.

We should add that *Omaggio a Sesto Properzio* is another elegantly produced volume from the publishing house of Edizioni S. Marco dei Giustiniani (vico Fieno 13, Genoa).

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*Don Chisciotti and Sanclu Panza*

By Giovanni Meli

Trans. into English verse

with intro. and notes by Gaetano Cipolla

Illus. by Giuseppe Vesco

Ottawa: Canadian Society for Italian Studies, 1986

The title of Giovanni Meli’s most ambitious poem should not mislead readers into thinking that it deals with the further adventures of Don Quijote and