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THE STRANGE CASE OF DR. SYNTAX AND MR. POUND

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OPENING STATEMENT

I HAVE TAKEN my title from Robert Graves's brilliant spoof on a eulogy of Ezra Pound published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1953.¹ In Graves's parody, cast as an interrogation of Pound by an imaginary headmaster (Dr. Syntax), Pound is roasted for the many mistranslations he made in his *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1917). Dr. Syntax tests the limits of mockery and Graves has Mr. Pound reply to charges of schoolboy incompetence with the words of his fawning *Times* reviewer (printed, appropriately, in Poundian UPPER CASE). As the testimony of one poet-translator against another, Graves's "Dr. Syntax and Mr Pound" is a fascinating document, stamped perhaps with the anxiety of influence. But it is also one of many depositions in the case against Ezra Pound, a case that began with the first appearance of excerpts from the *Homage in Poetry*, the prestigious Chicago-based magazine, in March 1919,² and continues to this day.³ I would like to offer here some additional evidence in the case—biographical information, personal correspondence, academic papers and reviews from the decades prior to and following the publication of the *Homage*—in order to document the biases involved in its production and reception.

¹ Robert Graves, "Dr Syntax and Mr Pound," in his *The Crowning Privilege: Collected Essays on Poetry* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 216-218. The TLS article, "The Poet as Translator," appeared in the 18 September issue, 1953, 596.

² Selections from book 3 of the *Elegies* were published under the title "Poems from the Propertius Series," *Poetry* 13 (1919): 291-299.

³ For other negative views published since WW II cf. Gordon M. Messing, "Pound's Propertius: The Homage and the Damage," in *Poetry and Poetics from Ancient Greece to the Renaissance: Studies in Honor of James Hutton*, ed. G. M. Kirkwood (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 1975), and Gilbert Highet in *Horizon* 33 (1961): 116 who notes that Pound's "Homage to Sextus Propertius is an insult both to poetry and to scholarship, and to common sense," and, moreover, "disgusting."

CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

Whether Graves knew it or not, there was in fact a historical Dr. Syntax named William Gardner Hale. Hale, professor of Latin at the University of Chicago since its foundation in 1892, responded to Pound's many errors in *Homage* with a letter to *Poetry* editor Harriet Monroe. Monroe published the letter in the April-September issue with the title "Pegasus Impounded."⁴ In it Professor Hale cites only "a few out of about three-score" boners in Pound's translation. These include *canes* (you shall sing) translated as "dogs," *sitiens* (thirsty) as "sitting," *vota* (vows) as "vote," *jugantes* (routing/putting to flight) as "fleeing," *vela* (sails) as "veil," and, perhaps the best of Pound's blunders, the translation of Propertius' *Cimbrorumque minas et benefacta Mari* (the threats of the Cimbrii and Marius' public service) as "Welsh mines and the profit Marius had out of them."⁵ Hale is forced to conclude that "if Mr. Pound were a professor of Latin, there would be nothing left for him but suicide. I do not counsel this," he interjects, "But I beg him to lay aside the mask of erudition." For Hale, where Pound hadn't mistranslated, his flippancy renderings "pervert the flavor of a consciously artistic, almost *academic*, original" (emphasis added).⁶

The offense taken to Pound's mangling of Propertius followed naturally from Hale's genuine academic love of the Latin language. His influential educational pamphlet *The Art of Reading Latin*, subtitled *How to Teach It* (1887), was undertaken, he tells us, with the "conviction that the modern mind could not be so degenerate as to be incapable of reading Latin as the Romans read it." Unfortunately, he continues,

our students, yours and mine, do not come to love those literatures. Perhaps they tolerate them, perhaps they respect them. But to love them and to make them a substantial part of their intellectual life,—that is a thing which many a student . . . fails to accomplish, and never so much as knows his loss.⁷

⁴ William Gardner Hale, "Pegasus Impounded," *Poetry* 14 (1919): 52-55.

⁵ J. P. Sullivan, *Ezra Pound and Sextus Propertius: A Study in Creative Translation* (Austin: U of Tex Pr., 1964), has come to Pound's defense and insisted that many of the mistakes cited by Hale were in fact "deliberate and serious attempts [on Pound's part] to produce certain poetic effects," and that "were Pound as 'incredibly ignorant of Latin' (in Hale's words) as to make *unintentionally* the bloomers Hale accuses him of, he would not have been able to read Propertius at all or get anything like the sense out of his elegies that he actually does" (5). That may be true in some cases where the Latin suggested an ironic pun in English (e.g., *vota-vote*), but it does not explain the misunderstanding of idiomatic Latin like *visus eram* ("I had a dream," *El.* 3.3.1) which Pound translates (literally) as "I had been seen."

⁶ Hale (above, note 4) 55, 52.

⁷ William Gardner Hale, *The Art of Reading Latin: How to Teach It* (Boston: Ginn, 1898), 5-6.

Hale spent his entire professional life as a scholar and educator trying to remedy that situation. And he had the credentials to do it: he had attended Phillips Exeter Academy and Harvard, and later studied in Göttingen and Leipzig.⁸ During his tenure at Chicago he made an important discovery of a neglected manuscript of Catullus while on sabbatical in Rome, and a number of Hale's conjectures based on its readings were incorporated into Robinson Ellis's 1913 Oxford edition. His many learned publications include the familiar Hale and Buck's *A Latin Grammar* (1903), and an earlier monograph entitled *The Cum-constructions: Their History and Functions* (1887), published while Hale was teaching at Cornell. The magisterial Cum-construction book received the honor of being translated into German for Teubner in 1891.⁹ Praise from Hale's German colleagues was lavish. In the foreword to the German edition B. Delbrück says that the book "in deutschem Kleide . . . auf der Höhe der zeitgenössischen Forschung steht." No mean scholar, Hale. Besides his expertise in classical philology, the professor is said to have possessed "well-trained and discerning judgment" in matters of art and "was fond of outdoor life, of the woods, of boating and fishing (which he enjoyed at his summer home on Moosehead Lake)."¹⁰

THE TESTIMONY OF EXPERTS

In his monograph on Pound's *Propertius* J. P. Sullivan compares the uproar over the appearance of *Homage* to the controversy aroused in the nineteenth century by the publication of Fitzgerald's free version of *The Rubāiyāt of Omar Khayyām*.¹¹ The analogy is exact. In fact (what Sullivan could not have known), Pound himself ventured the comparison in response to Hale: "Cat-piss and porcupines!" he writes to Monroe in an unpublished letter dated February 4, 1919.

The thing is no more a translation than my "Altaforte" is a translation, or than Fitzgerald's Omar is a translation. Poor brute [i.e., Hale] naturally . . . misses a number of avoidances of literal meaning.¹²

⁸ *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York: James T. White, 1933), 23: 80.

⁹ *Die Cum-Konstruktionen: ihre Geschichte und ihre Funktionen*, trans. A. Neitzert (Leipzig: Teubner, 1891).

¹⁰ *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Scribner, 1932), 8: 114.

¹¹ Sullivan (above, note 5) 14-16.

¹² *Poetry Magazine Papers 1912-1935*. Manuscript Archive, Box 38, Folder 10. Cited courtesy of the Joseph Regenstein Library's Department of Special Collections. The University of Chicago.

Apparently Monroe forwarded Hale's critique to Pound before "Poems from the Propertius Series" appeared in the March issue. I note that Pound's letter is signed "In commiseration" which Monroe in her response (also unpublished) took to mean Pound's resignation as overseas scout for *Poetry*.

If not Pound's non-translation, what was an acceptable version of Propertius in 1919? While Hale was acting editor of *Classical Philology* and American Associate Editor for *The Classical Review* there appeared reviews of three different English translations of Propertius. Taken chronologically, these show an aesthetic development that, one would think, moves in the direction of Pound's treatment of Propertius. But that, alas, was not to be the case.

A. E. Housman reviewed S. G. Tremenheere's translation *The Cynthia of Propertius* (1899) for *Classical Review* in 1900. Housman's especial complaint in this review is Tremenheere's colloquialisms: "There is nothing smart about slang terms like 'cut' and 'wig,' he writes. "They misrepresent Propertius, who is not a colloquial writer but literary to a fault, and they are repulsive. Misrepresentation of Propertius is indeed the capital defect of this performance: good or bad, in movement, in diction, in spirit, it is unlike the original."¹³

E. Seymer Thompson suggests some broader principles of translation in his review of J. S. Phillimore's 1906 version; but here again low diction is a culprit: "The greatest merit of a translation," Thompson writes, "is that the style should not attract attention to itself. Local colour is good . . . but . . . transparency is best." We learn further that excessive "modernisms" and "colloquialisms" are a particular "source of distraction to the reader." Thompson singles out Phillimore's translation of Propertius' *assiduis Edonis'fessa choreis* (1.3.5), turned as "an Edonian Bacchant wearing out by the pauseless sardband," as "the worst example of a modernism." Among colloquialisms are counted *ebria* (1.3.9) rendered as "fuddled," *ei mihi* (1.3.38) as "ugh," and *larranem Anubim* (3.11.41) as "snarling Anubis."¹⁴ What Thompson would have made of Pound's bungled expansion of Propertius' *non operosa rigat Marcius antra liquor* (3.2.14) to "Nor are my cavens stuffed stiff with a Marcian vintage, / My cellar does not date from Numa Pompilius, / Nor bristle with wine jars, / Nor is it equipped with a frigidaire patent," one can only guess. Hale certainly objected to it.¹⁵ Contrast Arthur Leslie Wheeler's review of H. E. Butler's original Loeb translation of 1912 (since replaced by G. P. Goold's stylish version). Wheeler writes,

¹³ *Classical Review* 14 (1900): 232-233.

¹⁴ *Classical Review* 20 (1906): 456-458.

¹⁵ It is symptomatic of Pound's recalcitrance that his translation of Propertius' *Marcius liquor* as "Marcian vintage" etc. was the only error he ever acknowledged, and that not until 1931 when, in a letter to Monroe (who had stoutly sided with Hale in the Propertius affair), Pound suggests that the detection of the error Hale "got not from his own intelligence or from a knowledge of Latin but from using an annotated edn." *The Letters of Ezra Pound: 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York: Harbrace, 1950), 149-150, 230.

Translations of Propertius must be judged with more than ordinary charity. The difficulties are so great that, as Professor Butler says, "an apology for . . . deficiencies is . . . unnecessary." And yet Professor Butler would have succeeded far better if he had consistently maintained the only principle which he professes to follow—that of keeping close to the original.¹⁶

"But," he adds,

closeness is very often directly opposed to Mr. Loeb's ideal of a rendering that shall be "a real piece of literature," . . . [though] a prose translation . . . cannot be at the same time "a real piece of literature" and (in any true sense) a faithful rendering. [Butler's] translation belongs in fact to the familiar type for which a sort of translation prose has been developed—a style employed exclusively for the rendering of classical poets. This type of translation is usually explicit where the original is vague; it intrudes metaphors where the original has none, or changes unnecessarily those which exist; it expands and interprets, and the English is shot with an excess of archaisms and toplofty expressions. . . . [All of which] makes of elegy something all too lofty. . . . The system which Professor Butler follows causes him not infrequently to miss the many gradations of tone—especially the colloquial, which is so prominent in Propertius.¹⁷

A "real piece of literature" is just what Pound thought he was producing in his *Homage* which is nothing if not modern and colloquial; "news that stays news," as he puts it in the *ABC of Reading*.¹⁸ However, despite Wheeler's protocol for translations in 1916 and his insights into the colloquial Propertius, as far as the "classical establishment" was concerned, Pound had violated the canons of taste in translation.

CROSS-EXAMINATION

Hale's attack was, in a sense, an isolated incident, prompted by the publication of a Latin translation in a local poetry magazine. Pound himself, however, was operating in a different milieu, living in London, writing essays for A. R. Orage's modernist newspaper *The New Age*, and working as occasional secretary to W. B. Yeats. Reactions to the *Homage* in Britain were also negative. However, the dialogical context in which these reactions are situated suggests that other ideologies besides "transparency in translation" and "likeness to the original" were involved in its reception.

After its publication in *Poetry*, Pound's *Homage* serialised in *The New Age* between June and August 1919 and appeared in Pound's *Quia*

¹⁶ *Classical Philology* 11 (1916): 236-238; 237.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁸ Pound, *ABC of Reading* (1934; repl., New York: New Dir Pr., 1960), 29.

paper amavi published by Eggoist in that same year. Adrian Collins reviewed the volume for the paper in November. He was only slightly more generous than Hale: "Mr. Pound will not finick about tenses, like a mere grammarian, any more than about cases," he writes, adding,

It is . . . hardly fair to judge the "Homage to Propertius" by reference to Propertius. It is obviously not meant as a translation, though it ventures rather too near the original to be taken simply as a free fantasia on Roman themes. Yet the seven major blunders in No. 12 and the five in No. 5 are enough to show that Mr. Pound refuses to make a feish of pedantic accuracy. The reader is not entitled to expect more than the "general sense," even when it is nonsense.¹⁹

At the time when Collins's review came out Pound was a regular contributor to *The New Age*. He published weekly a series of essays entitled "The Revolt of Intelligence" and other miscellaneous remarks in the paper. These rambling essays are characterized by provocative, anarchist statements like "'Religion' that gigantic and ineluctable ignorance before which all men are nearly equal," and punctuated with specific attacks on medieval Catholicism and Judaism. Throughout these essays Pound champions Rabelais, praises, for example,

the parody of . . . John and Ezekiel in his description of the clothing of the infant Gargantua; and, what is more remarkable for his times than his demolitions of mediaeval theology, his flat denial of "classic authorities" as in [quoting Rabelais] "Hippocrates . . . Pliny . . . Plautus . . . M. Vairo [sic] . . . Censorinus . . . Aristotle . . . Gellius . . . Servius, and a thousand other imbeciles."²⁰

This particular essay on the collusion of religion and imperialism ends with a peroration reminiscent of later cant which would cost Pound more than an audience:

We note, in support of our proposition *re* the futility of violence, that since the lions of the Tribe of Judah gave up the sword, "beat it" metaphorically into the pawn-shop, their power has steadily increased; no such suave and uninterrupted extension of power is to be attributed to any "world-conquering" bellicose nation. . . . Those of us who live in immaterial things, in art, in literature, "owe more" to Greece and Rome; the rest of the world "owes," or is alleged to owe, to the Jew.²¹

¹⁹ *The New Age* 26.4 (1919): 62. That translation was "in the air" in Fabian intellectual circles can be seen from P. Selver's twelve-part serial, "On the Translation of Poetry," which ran in *The New Age* from 16 July 1914 well past when Pound's *Homage* was completed in 1917.

²⁰ *The New Age* 26.1 (1919): 16.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Characteristically, Pound answered objections to this outburst in subsequent issues of *The New Age* with equally inflammatory cant: "My last antithesis," he writes, "sprang from no antisemitism. . . . Inasmuch as the Jew has conducted no holy war for nearly two millennia [sic], he is preferable to the Christian and the Mahomedan."²² Such parapoetic opinions earned Pound a backlash directed at his poetry, specifically the *Homage*.²³ Wilfred Rowland Childe wrote to *The New Age* charging Mr. Pound with ignorance for his rantings against Catholicism:

what shall we say of a presumably intelligent person [i.e., Pound] who . . . has published a translation of Propertius so full of egregious blunders that a fourth-form boy would be whipped for the least of them? Stick to your last, Mr. Pound; improve your Latin scholarship and leave the Latin Church alone, and for goodness' sake learn the elementary principles of good manners.²⁴

THE DEFENSE CALLS ITS WITNESS

To counter Collins's criticisms Pound directed readers to his "perfectly literal and, by the same token, perfectly lying and 'spiritually' mendacious translation" of Propertius in his earlier volume of poetry, *Canzoni*, published in 1911.²⁵ Pound drastically revised his translation of that same passage in *Homage* (*Hom.* 9.2.3 = *Canzoni* 22 = Propertius 2.28C), "debunking" thereby, according to Ron Thomas, "his own youthful aestheticism."²⁶ That may be. But, as we shall see momentarily, any aestheticism on Pound's part in 1911 was shot through with antagonism. Furthermore, Pound habitually directed his debunking away from himself. For example, in the response to Collins we read:

The philologists have so succeeded in stripping the classics of interest that I have already had more than one reader who has asked me, "Who was Propertius?" As for my service to classical scholarship, presumably nil, I shall be quite content if I induce a few Latinists really to look at the text of Propertius instead of swallowing an official "position" and then finding out what the text-books tell them to look for.²⁷

²² *The New Age* 26.2 (1919): 32.

²³ Indeed, it was Pound's supposed Fascism that raised Graves's ire too; Graves's political hatred of Ezra Pound even affected his view of the work of other poets whom he otherwise praised, like E. E. Cummings who stood by Pound in 1945. See Graves, "The Essential E. E. Cummings," in *The Crowning Privilege* (above, note 1) 166-170.

²⁴ *The New Age* 26.11 (1920): 179.

²⁵ *The New Age* 26.5 (1919): 82-83.

²⁶ Ron Thomas, *The Latin Masks of Ezra Pound* (Ann Arbor: UMI Res Pr, 1983), 44.

²⁷ Pound (above, note 25) has in mind J. W. Mackail's *Latin Literature* (1894), which he complained its "accepted as [the] 'right' opinion on the Latin poets." See Paige, *Letters* (above, note 15) 245-246.

Long before the publication of the *Homage* and Hale's criticisms we see Pound crusading against academia. In June 1917, a full two years before *Homage* appeared, Pound wrote to Margaret Anderson, editor of *The Little Review*:

The classics, "ancient and modern" are precisely the acids to gnaw through the thongs and bulls-hides with which we are tied by our schoolmasters.

They are the antiseptics. They are almost the only antiseptics against the contagious imbecility of mankind.

You read Catullus to prevent yourself from being poisoned by the lies of pundits; you read Propertius to purge yourself of the greasy sediments of lecture courses.²⁸

And on 29 November of the same year Monroe too got earfull:²⁹

Re the unGermanization of universities, which I have, as you may have forgotten, been yelling for some time, I now see that some professors have proclaimed it. NOT of course because they know what or why, but on "patriotic" [sic] grounds.

However, that should also be encouraged. And the nature of philology, as a system of dehumanization, gone into.³⁰

"Philology as a system of dehumanization," the "thongs and bulls-hides [of] schoolmasters," "the greasy sediments of lecture courses"? Where did this vindictive hatred of philology, particularly the German variety, come from?

THE SCENE OF THE CRIME

Pound can be seen positioning himself against classical philology at the very outset of his career. At age 21, having just returned from Europe and still a candidate for the M.A. in Romance Languages at the University of Pennsylvania, Pound wrote a short article for *The Book News Monthly* on "Raphaelite Latin." In this defense of non-classical Latin, Pound's first publication, we see a young man haunted by the spectre of German philologists. I cite at length because this piece has been for the most part overlooked by Pound scholars:

The scholars of classic Latin, bound to the Germanic ideal of scholarship, are no longer able as of old to fill themselves with the beauty of the classics, and by the force of that beauty inspire their students to read Latin widely and for pleasure. . . . The scholar is

²⁸ Paige, *Letters* (above, note 15) 113.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

compelled to spend most of his time learning what his author wore and ate, and in endless pondering over some utterly unanswerable question of textual criticism, such as: "In a certain epigram," not worth reading, and which could not get into print to-day, "is a certain reading *seca* or *seca?*" The meaning will be the same, but the syntax different." The scholar is bowed down to this Germanic ideal of scholarship, the life work of whose servants consists in fathering blocks to build that will be of no especial use except as a monument, and whose greatest reward is the possibility that the servant may have his name inscribed on the under side of some half-prominent stone where by a chance—a slender one—some future stone-gatherer will find it. This system has these results: it makes the servant piously thank his gods that his period ends A.D. 400, and that . . . there are some things written thereafter that he need not read. It also prevents his building a comfortable house for his brain to live in, and makes him revile anyone who tries so to do with the abject and utterly scornful "diletante."³⁰

Another attack on philology serves as a proem to his second published piece (again in *The Book News Monthly*), "M. Antonius Flaminius and John Keats: A Kinship in Genius." Pound, now Professor of Romance Languages in Wabash College, is mature beyond his years with cynicism: "I have not the slightest doubt," he writes, "that one might find (here and there) a professor or two who endanger their scholarly standing by being more interested in the genius of their author than in such artifice as intervenes between that genius and its expression: such as syntax, metric, errors in typography, etc."³¹

It is clear from these early statements that when Pound set himself the task of translating Propertius in 1917 he had already formed a healthy prejudice against the likes of Hale, an American scholar "in deutschem Kleide." "Like the priests and eunuchs to whom Pound often compares them," as Gail McDonald puts it, "American professors of literature engender nothing."³² They are, as Pound himself will later call them in the *Hell Cantos*, "betrayers of language . . . monopolists, obstructors of knowledge, / obstructors of distribution" (14.63). McDonald captures the very oppositional quality in Pound's aesthetic: "As a challenge to the primacy of money culture, Pound offers a Romantic description of art—the personally meaningful, unduplicatable outcome of the worker in creative engagement with his material."³³ The harvest of Pound's Romantic anti-academicism is his *Guide to Kulchur* (1938), "written," he tells us "for men who have not been able to afford an university

³⁰ Pound, "Raphaelite Latin," *The Book News Monthly* 25.1 (September 1906): 31-34.

³¹ *The Book News Monthly* 26.6 (February 1908): 445.

³² Gail McDonald, *Learning to Be Modern: Pound, Eliot and the American University* (Oxford: Oxford U Pr, 1993), 108.

³³ *Ibid.*, 109.

education or for young men, whether or not threatened with universities, who want to know more at the age of fifty than I know today."³⁴

A brief digression is necessary here, for scholars still go to great lengths to save Ezra Pound for the academy. In a recent article in *Paideuma* Michael J. Mages describes Pound as "an accomplished . . . scholar in Latin . . . intimately familiar with Propertius's work," who "as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania . . . had gained admission on the strength of his Latin preliminary examinations. . . . There can be little question," Mages insists, "as to Pound's competency to translate the Latin classical authors with something more than the average skill which a number of the early critics were eager to deny him."³⁵

This is nonsense. Mages cites Thomas's appendix on "Pound's Formal Training in Latin" for Ezra's above "average skill," but without the modern letter equivalents for "good" and "pass" the impression given of Pound's scholastic accomplishments is misleading.³⁶ J. J. Wilhelm is nearer the truth in his assessment of Pound's academic career. The "pass" he got at Penn in Latin 441 where he read Propertius is a rather undistinguished "C," and, overall, Pound's academic performance at UPenn is characterized by Wilhelm as "disappointing."³⁷ Nor did young Ezra excel in his "major," the Romance Languages, at Hamilton College where he finished the B.A. In 1907 he failed to get a travel grant renewed by UPenn because of mediocre performance, and lost his teaching fellowship.³⁸ To defend the quality of Pound's *Homage* on the basis of the translator's qualifications is a mistake.

It was Pound's "graduate experience" above all else that set his face like flint against institutional education and classical philologists. In 1929 Pound wrote the following famous letter to Penn's alumni association secretary:

what the HELL is the grad. school doing and what the HELL does it think it is there for and when the hell did it do anything but try to perpetuate the routine and stupidity that it was already perpetuating in 1873?

P.S. All the U. of P. or your god damn college or any other god damn American college does or will do for a man of letters is to ask him to go away without breaking the silence.³⁹

³⁴ Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (1938; rept., New York: New Dir Pr, 1968), 6.

³⁵ Michael J. Mages, "He Do Propertius in a Modernist Voice: Pound's Summary of the Amatory Theme from the *Elegies* of Sextus Propertius," *Paideuma* 22 (1993): 70-71.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁷ J. J. Wilhelm, *The American Roots of Ezra Pound* (New York: Garland Pub, 1985), 98-99.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

³⁹ Quoted *ibid.*, 155.

CLOSING REMARKS

Pound discovered in Propertius in war-year 1917 a political love-poet wrangling with "the infinite and ineffable imbecility of the Roman Empire," as he himself was wrangling with the British.⁴⁰ In Propertius' *recusationes* to write epic poems Pound took a stance against that empire, or, more broadly, a stance against what in *Maubertley* he calls "a botched civilisation." This is the orthodox opinion and I can accept it.⁴¹ But there's also the mediocre Latinist, full of tremendous personal creativity and rage stemming from that mediocrity. What Harold Bloom has recently proclaimed of himself, Pound was before him: "your true Marxist critic, following Groucho rather than Karl, and tak[ing] as [his] motto Groucho's grand admonition, 'Whatever it is, I'm against it!'"⁴²

A. E. Housman, the preeminent Latinist of our dying twentieth century, had similar anxieties, however without Pound's mediocrity. Having failed his Greats honors examinations at Oxford, Housman withdrew from school and worked at the Patent office until, at age 34, he was offered the Chair of Latin at University College⁴³ based on a number of learned articles he wrote about the Propertian textual tradition in his spare time.⁴⁴ "Who are the great critics of the classical literatures," Housman asks in his first lecture as a professional Latinist, "the critics with real insight into the classical spirit, the critics who teach with authority and not as the scribes?"

Lessing . . . Goethe or Matthew Arnold, scholars no doubt, but not scholars of minute or profound learning. Matthew Arnold went to his grave under the impression that the proper way to spell *lacrima* was to spell it with a y, and that the words ἀγδός παύδοφόνο ποτὶ στέγιοι χεῖρ' ὀρέγεσθαι meant "to carry to my lips the hand of him who slew my son."⁴⁵

Housman firmly believed that

No amount of classical learning can create a true appreciation of literature in those who lack the organs of appreciation. . . . no great

⁴⁰ Paige, *Letters* (above, note 15) 231.

⁴¹ So D. Thomas Benediktson, *Propertius: Modernist Poet of Antiquity* (Carbondale: S III U Pr, 1989), 8, following Sullivan (above, note 5).

⁴² Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harbrace, 1993), 520.

⁴³ See A. S. F. Gow, A. E. Housman: *A Sketch, Together with a List of His Writings and Indexes to His Classical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Pr, 1936), 6-14.

⁴⁴ "Emendationes Propertianae" (1888) and others are collected in *The Classical Papers of A. E. Housman, Vol. 1, 1882-1897*, ed. J. Diggle and F. R. D. Goodyear (Cambridge: Cambridge U Pr, 1972).

⁴⁵ A. E. Housman, *Introductory Lecture 1892* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Pr, 1937), 26-30.

amount of classical learning is needed to quicken and refine the taste and judgment of those who do possess such organs.⁴⁶

Ezra Pound had, I think, the organs of genius, or at least he wanted them.⁴⁷ I enter here no special plea on his behalf. I seek no particular verdict. But I will say this: Pound's *Homage to Sexius Propertius* is, for better or for worse, an "achieved" anxiety, Bloom's term for "any strong literary work [which] creatively misreads and therefore misinterprets a precursor text or texts."⁴⁸ Misread Pound certainly did, whether he meant to or not. But he also mucked with the aesthetic canons of a Chicago classicist, infuriated readers of a British newspaper, and made a work of art out of firewood in graduate school. For that he will get my only, everlasting praise.

Sometimes I wonder about my profession and I ask myself, to ironize a question posed by William Gardner Hale before the American Philological Association in 1900: "Is There Still a Latin Potential?"⁴⁹ Perhaps there is, if, heeding E. P., "Ezra Propertius,"

. . . the companions of the Muses
will keep their collective nose in my books,
And weary with historical data, they will turn to my
dance tune.

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GREEK PATTERNS IN SARTRE'S *LES MOUCHES*

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IN AN ARTICLE dealing with the differences between Sartre's treatment of Orestes in *Les mouches* and the earlier development of the same character in Greek drama, Victor Hanzzelli indicates that Sartre's "existentialist drama" constitutes a systematic rebuttal of all that the Greeks wrote about Orestes and Electra. The subjectivity of persons absent or latent in Greek tragedy, says Hanzzelli, "bursts out into the open" in Sartre's play to the extent that Orestes is no longer a disinherited pretender who takes revenge despite himself, but because he is Orestes and kills as Orestes—as distinct from all other human beings. Hanzzelli does admit a slight debt on Sartre's part to Euripides, but concludes that the Orestes of the Greek playwright, after a "flash of existential consciousness," assumes his original deterministic pose.¹

Alex Szogyi, on the other hand, traces the roots of *Les mouches* to Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, which, he maintains, presents a religious way of life and a form of politics. He notes too that Sartre, in his introduction to *Les Troyennes*, suggests that the Greeks had difficulty believing in polytheism, whose very beliefs canceled each other out. Moreover, in Sartre's Greek-inspired plays, says Szogyi, there is no true catharsis; Orestes' act has given him freedom, but not happiness, since it has only confirmed his exile.²

In short, while most critics are willing to concede to Sartre a Hellenic influence in terms of a broad mythological framework, they insist that he has transformed or abandoned Greek drama for the sake of the development of an "existentialist hero" who, evidently, is reflective of a philosophy which is totally divorced from, say, Gorgias' treatment of

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

⁴⁷ For Pound's cult of the "strong personality" and his worship of men like Odysseus, Confucius, John Adams, and Mussolini, see Thomas Cody, "Adams, Mussolini, and the Personality of Genius," *Paideuma* 18 (1989): 77-103.

⁴⁸ Bloom (above, note 42) 8.

⁴⁹ *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 31 (1900): 138.

¹ Victor E. Hanzzelli, "The Progeny of Atreus," *Modern Drama* 3 (1960): 76-78.

² Alex Szogyi, "Sartre and the Greeks: A Vicious Magic Circle," in Walter G. Langlois, ed., *The Persistent Voice: Essays on Hellenism in French Literature since the 18th Century in Honor of Professor Henri M. Peyre* (New York: NYU Pr., 1971), 162-169.