Chapter Two

“My genius is no more than a girl”

Exploring the Erotic in Pound’s Homage to Sextus Propertius

I

In the introduction, I briefly discussed the treatment of Pound’s Homage to Sextus Propertius as exemplary of the way criticism of Modernist translation has proceeded in large measure along distinctly undertheorized and even ahistorical lines. To expand upon this somewhat more fully: ever since its initial, partial publication in the March 1919 edition of Harriet Monroe’s Poetry, the Homage has elicited a sustained debate over its putative qualities as either an overly “free” distortion or a creatively “faithful” reproduction in English of Sextus Propertius’s original Latin odes. Appearing almost immediately, in the very next issue of Poetry in fact, the first of these denunciations came from the University of Chicago classicist William Gardner Hale, who set the tone for an entire strain of criticism of Pound’s efforts as a translator of Propertius by indicting all of the obvious liberties that the Modernist poet took with the original Latin text in producing his Homage simply as grammatical mistakes. Summarily declaring that “Mr. Pound is incredibly ignorant of Latin,” Hale referred to “about three-score errors” in just the four published sections alone out of the twelve comprising the entire poem. He went on to enumerate several specific “howlers” that he found particularly egregious, and these have become virtually obligatory points of discussion for all subsequent commentators on Pound’s achievement in the Homage. I myself will attempt to address the larger significance of some of these notorious “errors” later in this chapter. For now I want merely to say that, despite (or perhaps more accurately, precisely because of) all its stark poetic insensitivity and rigid theoretical
conservatism, Hale’s screed effectively constrained criticism of the *Homage* for a long time to seemingly endless debate over the question of whether Pound’s efforts merit the designation of “translation,” as if the meaning of, that is the practices and procedures subsumed under, that term were permanently and universally fixed, not subject to historical development or alteration under the different forces of evolving literary conceptions, and as if the *Homage* itself did not contribute to a reconfiguring of the very dimensions of “translation” as a literary mode during the Modernist period.

Alongside the numerous, academically based philological attacks issued by Hale and others against Pound for his unconventional treatment of Propertius, various more broadly minded critics have also extended praise to the *Homage* for successfully conveying different qualities of the original elegies apart from their sheer semantic content, thus illustrating the split between “scholarly” and “artistic” approaches to translation that the Modernists helped to perpetuate through their unorthodox methods. Among these include, perhaps not surprisingly, T. S. Eliot, who again proved himself one of Pound’s staunchest and most sympathetic readers when he wrote to explain why he decided to omit the *Homage* from his edition of *Ezra Pound’s Selected Poems* (1928):

> I was doubtful of its effect upon the uninstructed, even with my instructions. If the uninstructed reader is not a classical scholar, he will make nothing of it; if he be a classical scholar, he will wonder why this does not conform to his notions of what translation should be. It is not a translation, it is a paraphrase, or still more truly (for the instructed) a *persona*. It is also a criticism of Propertius, a criticism which in a most interesting way insists upon an element of humour, of irony and mockery, in Propertius, which Mackail and other interpreters have missed. I think that Pound is critically right, and that Propertius was more civilized than most of his interpreters have admitted; . . . I felt that the poem, *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, would give difficulty to too many readers: because it is not enough a “translation,” and because it is, on the other hand, too much a “translation,” to be intelligible to any but the most accomplished student of Pound’s poetry. ³

Within this group finding significant, positive value in Pound’s treatment of Propertius, which also includes R. P. Blackmur,⁴ J. P. Sullivan has written the most thorough analysis of the *Homage* in its complex intertextual relation to the original Latin love elegies out of which it arose, and his *Ezra Pound and Sextus Propertius: A Study in Creative Translation* (1964) remains the essential work on that subject. From Sullivan’s point of view, the *Homage* does indeed both constitute and largely succeed as a “translation,” though one after the fashion of Johnson’s *Vanity of Human Wishes* and Fitzgerald’s *Rubáiyát* rather than of the more conventional, doggedly semantic sort, as