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Imitating Ovid

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IMITATING OVID

LEE T. PEARCY

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Imitating Ovid

At the University of Texas in the early 1980s, I spent some time discussing Ovid's *Amores* with Peter Green, who was then working on his translation of Ovid's *Erotic Poems* (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin Books 1982). Conversations with Peter, Douglass Parker (1927–2011), Cynthia Shelmerdine, and others intersected with the work I was then doing on English Renaissance translations of Ovid¹ and led to these poems. They are not quite literal enough to be called translations, but they are close enough to be called Ovid.

Some of these imitations appeared in little magazines that were hard to find then and have now disappeared. It seems good to make the survivors available again through Bryn Mawr College's on-line repository. In order of first publication, they are

"*Amores* II.11, *Ad amicam navigantem*," *Aileron* 4.1 (1984), 16.

"*Amores* I.10, *Militat omnis amans*," *Window* no. 3 (1984), 10.

"*Amores* I.15, *Ad invidos*, with *Amores* II.1, *Quod amores scribere sit coactus*," *Pawn Review* 8.1 (1984), 64.

"*Amores* II.10, *Ad Graecinum, quod eodem tempore duas amet*," *Aileron* 6.1 (1985), 16–17.

The first of these did not deserve print then and does not now, and I can no longer find the second. I have made a few changes to the published texts of the remaining two and added one later Ovidian version that has not previously been published and one related poem, "Miletus 6.14.18," which appeared in *Aileron* 9.2 (1988), 13. I am grateful to Jane Wilson Joyce, who read and commented on some of these poems in draft, for advice and poetic example.

Lee T. Percy

¹ *The Mediated Muse: English Translations of Ovid, 1560–1700* (Hamden, CT 1984).

Amores 1.15, Ad invidos, quod fama poetarum sit perennis
with
Amores 2.1, Quod pro gigantomachia amores scribere sit
coactus

This too have I composed in ambush,
breathing through a reed, peering through others,
ignoring the dark injunction
that no man swims in the same text twice.
How can it be sloth to hide,
to keep eyes open, ears open, skin open,
all while avoiding law, or Little Rock,
or bank, or bench, or bed, or grave
procession from love to toleration,
or whatever it is that poets do?
Love my object, my subject, my verb
commands no scholar, who dives and comes up dry,
no adolescent, whose track the sun absorbs,
to read these lines for you or me or her.
Biography is damp and mortal work,
but ours the craft of heat and transformation.
Father, whose are those?
Look, on all sides light
laps and ripples, distorting what they touch.
Vati crede perito — vera canam:
Not all that flicker fade,
not all that write persuade,
not all your loves abide in
Golding, Marlowe, Sandys, and Dryden.
They took the fiery noun Amor, half pain,
and made it Love, a sound like wave or rain.
They took the glowing coal, the incantation,
concealed in horn, to light their desolation.
But desolation bright is desert still,
no place to hide, words ash, then chill.
Now wade the river through which you came;
seek not to change what must remain the same.
Father, did they too love?
Who cares?

Amores 2.10, *Ad Graecinum, quod eodem tempore duas amet*

Balance, Graecinus, balance.
Juggler, mountebank, cool
constructor, limping beggar, fool
and lover, all know:
grace needs one on either end.
But now I rock I teeter I spread
my arms pat air ludicrous,
o ludicrous, the man whose poise
suddenly doubles.

I spin there's one
again the other
eyes green grey eyes
in wit no way
to choose between
the winds now veer
unseen unseen.

Venus,
Why? To *be* the name of love
for dirt tree fruit wind sun star
must make us, who only read
this naked, forked, imperfect poem
(your clumsy son)
seem like old men
who strain to feel the text once thought so sure
and touch around the letters on a broken stone.
Divinity is no respecter of logics.

If A now fills a space
called me

 (I draw her in and breathe her out,
 burn her in my veins and move with her),
then B now fills the space called me
(I breathe her in and draw her out,
move her in my veins and burn with her).

A, B, see me
trip and fall—
but no harm done,

I'm a lightweight, really,
no scholar, but enough of the style to know
that hope, if false,
counts less than hopelessness when true.
Tomorrow I'll be fine:
good for something, strong of mind,
and if I cannot balance two,
then I shall stay, as fulcrums do,
counterbalance love with art,
rest between, and keep apart.

Amores 3.6, Ad amnem, ut iter faceret ad amicam

Ancient, prodigious lies,
the loves of rivers,
old poet's vatic mendacity—
how Helle's bracelet, the water god's
seductive toy, seduced
the swimming boy.
Flash on gold, graven ring
promised completeness
 circularity
still sweet power
of Word alloyed with Thing.
Forgotten his chain of strokes, broken
his arms' returning, he
stammered love's motions
and sank
to rest among the bones, far down,
thousand on thousand.
What gain?
Facts of his life
splashed, drifted
through green words
to mark unfathomed memory
until, crushed by hiding places
 decades deep, grey events
began to glow. In that was poetry.
Or, in time, translated into rivers
his transformations riddled—
Inachus Melie
a verb evaporating
this bitter pool
(all Neaera left of Xanthus)
Arethusa
absorbed as rain in earth
into these clean-picked words.
Why then relate Asopus, whom Mars's Thebe took,
drag my line through Ovid's book, make words
reflect mere words? In that

as much a myth, as much a lie,
as in such words as only say
what was, what happened.

I do not know much about rivers,
but I know that
the Lehigh's strong brown god
rose to entice Corinna:
"Do not be afraid—
unlike a novel, I have no ending.
Please, take this fan of bone
once focus for the muscles
at shoulder of a deer, gathered
(as in that suncatcher
light) to leap
across me in spring flood.
Haft it with sinew.
Inscribe the land, as once
in ancient tilling. I promise
all times gathered in my waters,
ancient Everests
clutched in syncline and anticline,
green quilt in baby's fist.
Bend and drink—
the rustle of giant ferns
buzzes in your gullet.
On my braided surface
read truth without time,
in outcrop pattern understand
structure in depth."
Slim and straight as the ruined mill's tower
Corinna swayed, leaned
on the air, bending lower
felt deception in his parting,
dove. The Lehigh rose
to meet her.
Around her body, between her thighs
the river stroked his words. Of lies
all lovers tell, the worst

denies past facts, makes history
into myth. Corinna, undeceived,
surfaced on the farther bank.

Rivers, in fact, divide
and take their time to do it.
To wish them quiet, to dream
that love will part the waters,
wanton hands stay the current,
bridge—vanity in that,
or pontification.
Do not pray for the dry bed either
or the stillness of a dry country.
Praise the liquid boundary of word and thing.
Face the current and time your strokes
to hold forever while muscle
remembers its office
bone
floats, sinew
stays supple—yet even
these clamant waters cannot drown
the word once set adrift
in August's heat.
You must emerge
chill for a moment, shuddering
as memory passes
until the sunlight above,
around, kept in rocks below
banishes love and gilds
Corinna on the farther shore
still. Not all
these words have moved on drop
or conjured up
the wings of Perseus, Ceres' car
(prodigies, ancient lies).

Miletus 6.14.84

Fighting the contrary wind
of foreign speech
that blew the common things
(toothbrush, credit card)
out of reach,
managing laundry without verbs,
dining on seven nouns, and drinking
the rest of his vocabulary,
he came at last to this:
a mosque in mirrored ruins
where agoras are paved with sky
scribbled by wind and cloud,
where Turks now tread and sow
the galley's harbors,
thanks to the river's
inexorability, its slow
flexing of silt.

THE SOURCE OF ALL: THE MOIST.

Krull the archaeologist pronounced:

"That city exists only in books."

Yet around him stones in patterns
refused to match the map he held.

No matter its orientation

he read only

THE SUN: FLAT LIKE A LEAF.

So shelter.

Around and around
the irrelevant Ottoman dome

a bird cast hot from the sky

circled, circled, scanned

for its place in the forme.

Justified at last

against the glass of his mind

he read of friendship shattered,

love decomposed, words

become foul matter, unable

to resist the pointless letters

making IN TIME'S ASSESSMENT
FOR THEIR INJUSTICES
JUST RECOMPENSE
TO ONE ANOTHER.
No meaning save recombination.