

*De Duobus Libellis*

Talk given at CAMWS meeting, Athens, Georgia, April 1960

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Everybody has something which he likes to display when an opening occurs. Some people pull out their children's pictures; others turn out the lights and show scenes from their travels. I have no children and no travel slides, but I do have a little booklet of paraphrases from the Latin poets, which I wish to share with you, in spite of the fact that some of you will consider my handling of the Latin authors brutal.

Dr. Garrett Thiessen was my collaborator on these verses. That statement is not startling until I say that Dr. Thiessen is the head of our Chemistry Department. He is the kind of person who is awarded a medal by the Manufacturing Chemists' Association, and who (after his regular daily undergraduate courses) teaches government-sponsored night courses in radioactivity. He is a most unlikely person to be walking around quoting Ovid and Seneca -- in Latin! His hobby, however, is Latin. He can recite in the original every line paraphrased in this booklet, and he can repeat (without notes) any one of Macaulay's "Lays of Ancient Rome" which you care to hear. He is, not surprisingly, an active and ardent proponent of my department. Students (and administrators) who pay no attention to my pleas for the Classics listen to him because he is the most highly respected man of science on our campus. It is amazing what a scientist's endorsement can do for the prestige of such an uncommercial subject as Latin.

Our little book came into existence quite by accident. Early in 1958 an announcement was made that a small amount of money was available to our faculty for research projects. Dr. Thiessen, who always keeps the Classics Department in mind, immediately suggested that I ask for some of this money to put into booklet form some verse translations of the Latin poets, to be made by my students in advanced classes. The answer to my request was a grant for such a booklet but with the stipulation that this money was for "faculty" use -- the paraphrases were to be made "only" by Dr. Thiessen and me. That had not been our plan. But it is a matter of principle with me never to turn down a chance to "do something" for or with classical literature; and it is an equally strong principle with Dr. Thiessen never to allow available money to lie around unused.

We each had a few unpolished paraphrases on hand. He had used his in the teaching of a Sunday school class, and I had made mine just for fun when I happened to be teaching a course in Horace or Martial or Catullus. We licked into shape some of our favorites and had a hundred copies printed -- under the unimaginative title of POEMS FROM THE LATIN. I am not an optimist, and I was convinced that we would be lucky if we disposed of twenty-five copies by twisting the arms of our closest friends to accept them. Much to my surprise, the entire hundred copies were gone within two weeks. One of the most gratifying sights in my experience was the day I put some copies in the faculty lounge; and I saw the academic dean, the head of the History Department, and an education professor all reading their copies at the same time. It was like the ad that says: "In Philadelphia almost everybody reads the Bulletin." After such amazing success we had another 150 copies printed, and these also have dwindled to exactly two copies, which we do not want to part with.

Two considerations determined the nature of the poems in this publication. We had made paraphrases of the poems that we had especially enjoyed; thus many of them are amusing rather than significant, like the Martial epigram which might be applicable here:

Why do you wear on your neck a scarf  
When for speaking you appear?  
That protective covering would have more use  
If it covered your listener's ear.

Also, when we realized that we were "breaking into print," our aim was to appeal to an audience without a classical background. We hoped to prove to both college administrators and potential Latin students that reading Latin was not just learning that all Gaul was divided into three parts; it consisted of much that was entertaining and contemporary in application. Footnotes to explain references to the uninitiated would have completely destroyed the effect desired. Therefore, we avoided topical allusions, and in some places I drastically modernized the situation. My aim was to say in modern terms what the Latin poets had said. The originals, of course, lose something rather valuable in this kind of adaptation, and this loss is what a classical scholar will deplore. But remember that this book was not designed to delight the classicist, a member of a very small minority group even on college and university campuses. Instead, its appeal was directed toward the larger audience of people whose knowledge did not include the works of Horace and Juvenal. In fact, in too many instances, it did not even include their names. Thus in my version of Horace's satire on the bore, the reference to Maecenas is changed to a modern political term, and a required appearance at a Roman court proceeding, which has no equivalent in America in 1960, becomes an illegally parked car. Here is the poem (*Satires* 1.9):

As I was strolling down the street,  
Enjoying life, I chanced to meet  
A man whom I could call by name;  
That's all the acquaintance we could claim.  
Like a long-lost pal he grabbed my hand,  
Inquiring, "How are you doing?" and  
To be polite I said, "Not too  
Bad, and I hope the same is true  
With you." I walked on; so did he.  
I asked, "Did you wish to see me?"  
"Only to talk, since you and I  
Are both great talkers." His look was sly.  
"That's good," I stupidly replied,  
And then I desperately tried  
To get away. I would walk fast,  
Then stop at store windows we passed.  
He did the same, and all the time  
He kept on talking, without rhyme  
Or reason -- about the weather,  
The new fall styles, the cost of leather

Goods. I cursed my plight,  
And wished I weren't so darned polite.  
"Where are you going?" he inquired.  
"To see a friend," I answered, tired  
Of being kind. "He's very ill  
With a bad virus that's sure to kill."  
Finally, my desire to be  
Rid of him he had to see.  
Then he remarked, "You'd like me to  
Be gone and cut out pestering you.  
But I am going along to see  
Your friend with you -- you can't shake me!"  
"Don't you have mother, children, wife?"  
I asked. "You should not risk your life."  
"Nope," he replied, "I've buried all  
My family." Lucky I would call  
Them. Now there's only me  
For him to talk to death. 'Twas he  
The fortune teller must have meant  
When she said physical ailment  
Would not bring me to my last breath --  
Some chatterbox would be my death.  
And now he got around to talk  
Of why he "really" joined my walk.  
"I hear that you and Mayor Brown  
Are very close. He runs the town,  
And you run him. I'm sure that he  
Would find it helpful to meet me.  
I know some places he could get  
Some good kick-backs if he would let  
Me work for him." I angry cried,  
"I don't advise him, and besides,  
He would not enter a dishonest deal."  
"That," he said blandly, "makes me feel  
That more than ever I'd like to know  
    So good a man. I'd love him. So  
Introduce me, and I'll say  
A good word for you every day."  
"You don't need introductions," I  
Replied; "Your gall will get you by."  
Just then I saw my closest friend  
And thought my troubles now would end.  
I called him, and with nods and signs  
So he could not miss my designs,  
I said, "I had almost forgot  
We wished to talk about a lot

Of "private" matters right away."  
He laughed and said, "Some other day  
Will do. I see you're busy now."  
I'll get even with him some day, somehow!  
I'd given up hope when all at once  
A policeman tapped my leech -- the dunce  
In his pursuit of me had parked  
His car by a hydrant. He embarked  
To move it, begging me to wait.  
But I sneaked out and escaped my fate.

When we were offered an opportunity to bring out a second booklet during the summer of 1959, we accepted -- this time with less trepidation. This booklet (given an equally inspired title of *More Poems from the Latin*) differs somewhat from the first one. These paraphrases were written (like Pliny's letters) with an eye to publication; thus they are a little more carefully selected and polished than the previous ones. Also this collection is directed to a different audience from the one in our minds earlier. The anachronisms, therefore, are much less frequent. In fact, one reference to tranquilizer pills is the only phrase I can think of which would be incomprehensible to the Latin poets. This is a booklet which I hope people like you will enjoy.

One poem from this was selected to be printed in the current anthology of poems written by teachers and librarians, put out annually by the National Poetry Association. It happens to be Catullus' most frequently paraphrased poem (Catullus 3). Here is our version:

Let every lovely thing bow down its head  
In grief: the world lacks charm it had before.  
The sparrow of my dear one now is dead;  
The darling of my darling is no more.  
It loved her as a child would love its mother.  
It sat upon her finger trustingly,  
And sang for her alone and for no other,  
As she smiled down at it adoringly.  
But now the voice is stilled. Never again  
Will it sing out its notes of joy and mirth.  
Oh, cruel selfish Death, with cold disdain  
You crush all precious, lovely things to earth.  
Poor pretty sparrow, she whom you held dear  
Has mourned your vanished charm with many a tear.

We are now working on a third issue in this series. I don't know what we can call this one, since it would hardly sound right to name it MOST POEMS FROM THE LATIN.\* But anyhow, here is a sneak preview of the new material to go into it -- Martial's "Issa," with my own chihuahua's name substituted. (EPIGRAMS 1.109):

Tico -- more beguiling than the sparrow of Catullus;  
Tico -- with a kiss to warm the heart of any girl;  
Tico -- more appealing than a curly-headed youngster;

Tico -- much more precious  
    than a diamond or a pearl.  
There is nothing more enchanting  
    than my little pet dog, Tico.  
When I talk to him  
    he almost seems to say  
That he knows and shares my sadness  
    when my world seems dark and lonely  
And his heart is filled with joy  
    when I am gay.  
He has added so much pleasure  
    to the routine of my living  
That I cannot bear the haunting thought  
    that death  
Will erase his personality  
    with quick annihilation,  
His existence to be lost  
    with his last breath.  
So I had a picture painted --  
    such a likeness to my pet!  
Put the painting by the dog  
    and you will feel  
That the picture is so lifelike  
    that it has to be alive,  
And the dog himself  
    too charming to be real.

During this meeting you are being served various dishes of classical meat to chew and digest -- some of it well seasoned. What I have offered you is more in the form of an after-dinner mint -- inappropriately handed to you in the middle of the morning! It didn't give you much mental nourishment, but I hope that you found it a bit refreshing.

\*After this talk was given, the third issue was printed under the title, *Paraphrases from the Latin*. This has been through a number of reprints and is still available through the Classics Department of Monmouth College.