NOTES ON A TRANSLATION OF GEORGE HERBERT’S LATIN POEMS

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George Herbert (1593-1633) is, of course, in the first place known for his English poetry. He can be described as a devotional and metaphysical poet of the school of John Donne. His Latin poems have attracted much less attention, but see the evaluation by W. Hilton Kelliher in J.W. Binns, *The Latin Poetry of English Poets* (London 1974) 26ff.

All of George Herbert’s Latin poems were printed and translated by Mark McCloskey & Paul R. Murphy (Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio, 1965).1 The Latin text is from *Works of George Herbert*, edited by F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford 1923). In the introduction, the translators write concerning the translation technique: ‘For the scholar and critic we took care to be exact in rendering Herbert’s imagery and usage ... For the general reader, we used free verse forms ...’ (VII). Often, however, the translations are so free that they seem to have little to do with the Latin original, and now and then one has the impression that the translators did not understand the Latin at all.

Here are a few examples:

*Ne te productis videar lassare Camoenis,*
*pro solido, Caesar, carmine frusta dabo* (6-7 no. 1)

‘And lest I seem to tax you with tiring verses, I shall give to you, Caesar, not one but several songs.’

Too free: ‘...instead of one coherent song, I shall give fragments.’

1 As far as I know, this is the only complete translation of Herbert’s Latin poetry.
Astronomus olim (ut fama) dum maculas diu, quas Luna habet, tueetur; in foveam cadit, totusque caenum Cynthiae ignoscit notis (30ff. no. 22).

‘... fell in a ditch, and totally forgot the filth in the stains of Cynthia.’

Rather: ‘... and being himself full of dirt, forgave the moon her spots.’ Concerning Cynthia as a name of the moon, see the dictionaries.

Vulpibus antra feris, nidique volucribus adsunt, quodque suum novit stroma, cubile suum. Qui tamen excipiatur, Christus caret hospite: tantum in cruce suspendens, unde reclinet, habet (72-73 no. 15).

‘... hanging on the cross, he has only a place in which to languish.’

Rather: ‘... only when hanging on the cross, has he (found) a place in which he can rest.’ Cf. Matth. 8.20.

Sanus homo factus, vitiorum purus uterque; at sibi collisit fictile Daemon opus. Post ubi Mosaicae repararent fragmina leges, infectas tabulas facta iuvenca scidit (78-79 no. 20).

‘... When in after times the Mosaic covenant fixed the pieces, a brazen heifer broke and wrecked the tablets.’

Facta iuvenca is in contrast to sanus homo factus in the first line: ‘man, having become a (wild) heifer ...’

‘On vainglory’
Qui sugit avido spiritu rumpeculos et flatulentas aucupatur glorias ...
Quare, peritus nauta, vela contrahas, famamque nec difflaveris nec suxeris (96-97 no. 20).
‘... Don’t let your fame be loose, don’t suck it in too much.’

Rather: ‘... Don’t blow your fame about’ (i.e. don’t boast of it).

*mea (sc. mater) non fuerat tam nubila Juno,
tam segnis facies aurorae nescia verna,
tam languens genitrix cineri supposta fugaci* (136-37).

‘Not so made of mist my Juno was, not so much a snail that she did not
know the morning’s freshness ...’

Why ‘snail’? Confusion of vermis and verna? Translate: ‘... unaware of
the dawn of spring.’

*Post ubi crudelem sentit (sc. ilex) divisa securem,
quo placet oblato mortua fertur hero* (144-45 no. 11).

‘Later when split it feels the savage axe, that time
when its superior has come, it is, dead, carted off.’

Rather: ‘... it is carted off dead to where it pleases its master who has
come.’
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