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Kenneth Rexroth
GREEK ANTHOLOGIST

GIDEON NISBET

Nothing left but the broken walls—
The crumbling frescos scrawled with smoke
And the obscenities of Greek
Infantrymen.

—KENNETH REXROTH, PHAEDRA
(BEYOND THE MOUNTAINS, 1951, 27)

Poet, anarchist, critic, teacher, and self-taught polymath, Kenneth Rexroth (1905–82) was not best pleased when Time magazine dubbed him in retrospect the “Father of the Beats.” His riposte has become famous: “An entomologist is not a bug.” Rexroth had arrived before, and rated himself above, the San Francisco movement that he helped bring into the world. (When Ginsberg read Howl at the 6 Gallery in October 1955, Rexroth was master of ceremonies, and he was a witness for the defense at the obscenity trial that followed its publication two years later.) The movement’s enthusiasms—the life of the road, the infatuation with Chinese culture—were to him old news; his early life had been a Kerouac novel before the fact.

As a writer and thinker, Rexroth considered himself a breed apart from the angry young men whom he angrily called the “unemployable, over-educated, miseducated members of the lumpen intelligentsia” (Rexroth 1986, 72). He had taught himself to read numerous languages (if not perhaps very well),

1. From his journalism, damning Kerouac as a poor modern substitute for Petronius into the bargain. This was tit for tat: Rexroth the elder statesman of the San Francisco scene had been pastiched in Kerouac’s The Dharma Bums (1958) in the character of Rheinhold Cacoethes, a speaking name (“Badcharacter”) that mocks his Hellenic hobbyism. We meet Cacoethes again at chapter’s end.
and he prided himself on his knowledge of the Great Books of the Western tradition. His influences were not theirs, or not in his reckoning. One of these influences, and one of long standing, is the subject of my chapter. Rexroth had cut his teeth as a writer in Chicago, the seedbed of imagism, and from the imagists—H.D., Pound, Aldington—he picked up a taste for the peculiar ancient classic that had inspired their movement: the Greek Anthology. He offered versions of poems from this Anthology in two major publications, the first near the beginning and the second at the peak of his poetic career: *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* (1944), and the explicitly titled *Poems from the Greek Anthology* (1962).

It is with the latter of these that my chapter is principally concerned. Published by the University of Michigan Press under its Ann Arbor Paperbacks imprint, *Poems from the Greek Anthology* (henceforth, *Poems*) was most recently reissued in 1999 with a partial concordance. All references in this chapter are however to the original publication of 1962 (the text is identical). This first edition is worth seeking out for its fine linocut illustrations, by the artist and industrial designer Geraldine Sakall, who also illustrated Douglass Parker's translations of *Acharnians* (1961) and *Wasps* (1962) for Ann Arbor at around the same time. Sakall's artwork contributed tangibly to the book's favorable critical reception, and deserves its own critical treatment (concerns of space preclude its discussion here).

**Rexroth and the Tradition of the Anthology**

As a hybrid work, neither entirely ancient nor conventionally a classic, and one not well known even among students of ancient literature, the Greek Anthology needs some brief explanation—all the more so since (for reasons peculiar to its genre) it has been so often misrepresented to the Anglophone reading public by translators and exegetes. Its principal content is epigram, a genre of short poem, typically composed in elegiac couplets and most frequently running to two, four, or six lines. The Anthology contains about 4,000 such poems. Its tradition is authentically ancient, running right back to the

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4. I give an account of this peculiar reception history in a recent monograph (Nisbet 2013), taking the story as far as 1929; the current chapter brings it closer to the present day.
Garland of Meleager (first century BCE), but the Anthology we read today was compiled in tenth-century Byzantium. Its complex bulk tells tales on a millennium’s worth of compilation, reediting and reordering, and expurgation. In its present form it consists of sixteen books, inartistically arranged and often disorderly—not so much poetry books as repositories. Most, but not all, comprise epigrams of one particular type: dedicatory, for instance, or epitaphic. All are conventionally cited by the abbreviation “AP,” for the best of its manuscripts: *Anthologia Palatina*, the Palatine Anthology.

For a work with such a garbled history and with such a mix of content, in character and period as well as quality—even on its best days, epigram is reckoned a “minor” genre—the Anthology managed to carve out quite a niche for itself in the Western tradition, even in the inferior and censored redaction known to the Renaissance (the “Planudean” Anthology). It was much used in schools as a teaching text for classical languages, and former schoolboys often liked to tinker up versions of their own. In the later nineteenth century, it also became an important vehicle for popularizing critics who wished to communicate (their version of) the spirit of Ancient Greece to a newly literate mass public.

One of these critics demands our particular attention as a precondition for understanding the Anthology’s place in twentieth-century American translation. He is John William Mackail, a charismatic educationalist whose books on classical topics were best sellers throughout the English-speaking world. His most enduring legacy was as the editor and translator of a modern Garland: *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology* (first edition 1890; henceforth, *Select Epigrams*). Mackail’s 500 “best” poems, newly edited with explanatory notes and arranged into twelve “chapters,” came with a translation into plain, clear modern prose. *Select Epigrams* was an immediate critical and popular triumph, supplanting its source text and becoming genuinely canonical in a way the Anthology had never quite managed for itself; for the coming decades, it was the Greek Anthology for English-speaking readers and writers across the world. No other translated text exercised such lifelong fascination; and in the United States, Mackail was loved more and loved longer even than at home.

Mackail assiduously winnowed the Anthology to make it moral and patriotic—an ideal school text, and later the major poetic exemplar for remember-

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5. The introduction to Livingstone and Nisbet 2010 gives a brief account and suggests further reading.
6. The surveys by Hutton (1935, 1946) remain valuable.
7. On Mackail’s ascension to canon status, see Nisbet 2013, 256–58; on his American fame, 241–42, 247.
ing the British and Commonwealth dead of the Great War. After the war, translators took it in a less martial direction as nature poetry, often with an erotic spin; Rexroth’s major American prototype, Wallace Rice (1927), went further, turning the “Anthology” borderline-pornographic through free adaptation, expansion, and outright invention. Rexroth will follow this precedent. Whatever their bent, Select Epigrams was the constant touchstone of fellow translators right through into the 1920s, and installed the Anthology as a key text of poetic modernism. Virginia Woolf became an Anthology addict when her brother Thoby gave her Mackail for her twentieth birthday:

Your book has come, and delights me. These little Epigrams I think I appreciate most of all Greek—as the feminine mind would, according to my theory. And MacKail [sic] isn’t so precious as I thought—and some—most that I know—of the epigrams are divine—I read them over and over again. (1975, 46–47)

When H.D. worked up the versions from the Anthology that Pound (London, 1912) declared the sacred scripture of a new literary movement, dubbed on the spot “imagism,” Select Epigrams was her source; we know she ended up owning at least three copies. Pound became a convert. This imagist connection is how the Anthology came to hold such importance for Rexroth. His poetic trajectory and identity in many ways followed H.D.’s, notably in her conception of translation as an act of imaginative recreation. In pursuit of that goal, Rexroth followed in her footsteps toward other ancient classics, too—her fixation on reversioning Euripides pretty clearly set him on the same early career path of revisionist drama in Greek dress—but the Anthology seems to have got the deepest under his skin. He quickly developed firm ideas about what it could be made to mean as a corpus, through slanted excerption:

8. On Mackail and Simonides, see ibid., 241, 244–45. On Select Poems and the war, see briefly but influentially Fussell 1975, 180–81; on Kipling, Vandiver 2010 delivers depth and nuance.
The poems in this book might be considered as developing, more or less systematically, a definite point of view. That development proceeds genetically or historically. The classical paraphrases come first. . . . I have tended to select those that best show forth a sense of desperation and abandon in the face of a collapsing system of cultural values. In contrast, there are other epigrams of resignation. (Rexroth 1944, 9)

Phoenix helped put him on the map as a poet to watch, and its conception of the Anthology is distinctively imagist, that is, Mackailian. But then, the sudden reversal: “[The epigrams] are mostly from Hellenistic, Byzantine and Late Roman sources, and from Martial.” (Rexroth 1944, 9, emphases added)

**Separating the Truth from the Facts**

My pal at BTJ [perhaps the Miami technical school, Boys Town Jerusalem] has sent down the video-film of my reading there. If I had known I was being shot I would have tried to be more resolute. The reader is a pathetic old cripple who has to be helped to his chair at the microphone. His tremor is bad and he drops his pages on the floor; but a nubile young maiden rushes up to pick them up for him. He sighs a good deal . . . The best part is when he’s reading those hot versions of the Greek Anthology; the camera pans around the audience and young ladies can clearly be seen rubbing their legs together. Où sont les neiges. (Laughlin 2006, 251)

Rexroth enlisted Martial and the Latins because they were good for the grand narrative on which he had already determined: Decline and Fall (with, as recalled here, a side order of orgies after the manner of Wallace Rice). His taste for Latinizing the Anthology of the Greeks was to assert itself again eighteen years later in his second and more explicitly advertised bout of adaptation, Poems, to which we now turn our attention. The non-Greek content of this volume is one of its most striking features—it pretty explicitly gives the lie to the book’s own title, something no “Greek Anthologist” before had had the nerve to try—and makes a sensible point of first contact for our engagement with the volume. The unpaginated preface shrugs away the anomalies:

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13. E.g., Rexroth (1944, 9) “find[s] no epitaph” there for Harmodius and Aristogeiton—because there is none in Mackail or the Anthology *stricto sensu*; this hadn’t stopped nineteenth-century translators packing them in from elsewhere.

14. Quoting a letter from his friend; the “. . .” would appear to be Rexroth’s own punctuational heavy breathing rather than an ellipsis, per se.
Along with the epigrams of the Anthology are a few lyric fragments and some bits of Latin. Once I thought I might do a book from the Latin Anthology, the Petroniana, Luxorius, Maximian’s Fifth Elegy, Amare Liceat, Martial, Ausonius, some of the Carmina Burana, and the Plaints of Abelard. Actually Latin verse, with its rhetorical emphasis, does not interest me greatly, and it is unlikely that now I shall ever devote so much time to it. So these few pieces are scattered among the 100 Poems from the Greek Anthology as an extra dividend.

Continuity with Phoenix gives the lie to this tale. Rexroth did not simply happen to include a few bits and pieces he had lying around; instead he is deliberately rehashing and enlarging the cultural eschatology he sketched out all those years before. By design, the Latin authors of Poems trend late. Ausonius (late fourth century) studied Martial closely after a gap of centuries; Luxorius is sixth century, a poet of North Africa under the Vandals; Maximianus, an Italian of the same period, is conventionally called the “last of the Roman poets.” Phoenix had already cast them as the last gasp of Late Antiquity (“desperation and abandon”), ushering in a very different and definitively post-classical world in which new kinds of voice and perspective, religious and romantic, were to dominate after a lapse of centuries (Abelard, Carmina Burana).

“Some bits,” a “few pieces,” “scattered”—the scale of Rexroth’s misrepresentation becomes apparent when we run the numbers. Like every predecessor in translation from the Anthology, and with good reason, Poems ignores the clumsy historic form of its text, here dismissed as a technicality of interest only to specialists. Its particular solution is to present its authors alphabetically, from Agathias and Ammianus to the obscure Tymnes and Zonas (we will examine the volume’s opening and closing sequences later in this chapter). This is as good a scheme as any, rests on solid precedent, sells the book well by hinting at comprehensiveness, and has the incidental virtue of making it easy to track who purportedly wrote what. The roster is so extraordinary, it bears presentation in full, with the Latin elements emboldened. My frequent “[sic]”-ing reflects Rexroth’s difficulties with ancient proper names:

Agathias—Ammianos—Anixamandros [sic]—Anonymous (x 11)—
Anonymous Carmina Burana (Abelard?)—Antipatros [sic] of Sidon

15. “I have provided no notes or other apparatus—the last word of scholarship on these things has been said long ago,” Rexroth (1962) advises in his unpaginated foreword. Actually it had hardly begun.
(x 4)—Antipatros [sic] of Thessalonika—Anyte (x 3)—Archilochos—Aristodikos of Rhodes—Asklepiades of Samos (x 9)—Ausonius, after Rufinus—Bassos [sic] (x 2)—The Delphic Oracle—Glykon—Hedylos—Ibykos—The Emperor Julian—Kallimachos—Krates—Krinagoras—Leonidas of Tarentum (x 14)—Lucian—Markos Argentarios [sic]—Martial (x 7)—Meleagros (x 3)—Nicharkos [sic]—Nossis (x 2)—Palladas (x 4)—Paulos Silentarios [sic] (x 4)—Petronius (x 6)—Philodemos (x 7)—Plato—Poseidippos (x 2)—Sappho (x 4)—Sekundos [sic]—Simonides (x 3)—“Simonides, Antipatros, and others”—Sulpicius Lupercus Servavius Jr.—Thymokles—Tymnes—Zonas.

Some of these choices embrace conventionality. For instance, we get plenty of Sappho, who (though really not an epigrammatist) was an Anthology author as far back as Meleager’s Garland, and whose poetry was Rexroth’s own first foray into the joys of Greek. The genre’s Hellenistic and Imperial Greek heyday is quite well represented—for example, by Antipater, Asclepiades, Meleager, Philodemus, and Posidippus—as are the Late Antique poets (Agathias and Paul the Silentiary), whose imitative poems had so often helped fill out the school textbooks. Simonides, too—a poet of Greece’s classical age, famed for his verse inscriptions celebrating the Greek achievement in the Persian Wars—has a showing that reflects his traditional popularity, including with Mackail. Other inclusions, though, are so utterly obscure—Tymnes, Zonas—that their inclusion in a distilled, best-of-the-best “Greek Anthology” of a mere 109 poems seems deliberately perverse to a reader who knows the source material (though, of course, most will not).

And then there is all the Latin. “I know what the Greek says,” declares the translator’s preface, but much of his Anthology was never in Greek to begin with. At least Martial is an epigrammatist; Petronius is only rarely a poet, and then usually in the service of either satire or an obscure point of literary-critical polemic (his reader is usually clueless as to which). Rexroth’s versions of them are fun, but we might wonder why in a small selection of a hundred-odd so-called “Poems from the Greek Anthology,” a source text with many thousands of poems to its name, a baker’s dozen of them—just under an eighth of the whole—are out of two Latin poets. Ausonius has the unusual distinction of being a poet as fluent in Greek as in Latin; but Rexroth chooses to go to his Latin side. Add in Carmina Burana, and nearly a seventh of Rexroth’s “Greek Anthology” is Latin. What was he playing at?

Actually the facts—X was Greek, Y was actually Roman—did not loom large in Rexroth’s scheme of things; what mattered was truth, and truth made
Romans and Greeks interchangeable. Introducing his first volume of collected journalism, *Classics Revisited*, he wrote:

Eskimos, Polynesians, Romans, Chicagoans—all men have the same kind of bodies and the same kind of brains and cope with an environment in ways which would seem more uniform than not to an observer from another planet. (Rexroth 1986, vii)\(^{16}\)

In Rexroth’s estimation, a literary classic speaks truths that we all share; it “reveals . . . the fundamental dynamism of human life in the way, for instance, in which the operation of a power plant reveals the laws of physics” (vii–viii). His pessimistic vision finds no more progress in literature than in life—the human tragicomedy is forever being played out to the same script, dictated by genetics and environment—so all classics are equally modern:

The greatest literature presents men wearing the two conventional masks: the grinning and the weeping faces that decorate theatre prosceniums. What is the face behind the double mask? Just a human face—yours or mine. That is the irony of it all—the irony that distinguishes great literature: it is all so ordinary. (ix)

His versions of epigram accordingly play a game of mix-and-match, as in this example, riffing on a sympotic epigram by Antipater of Sidon (AP 11.23):

Fortune-tellers say I won’t last long;  
It looks like it from the newspapers;  
**But there is better conversation**  
in *Hell than in an insane nation*;  
And a galloping jug will get there  
Quicker than these loud pedestrians,  
**Tumbling down hill witless in the dust.**

ANTIPATROS [sic]  
(Rexroth 1962, 17, emphases added)

There is considerable expansion and alteration here: nearly half the poem (the emboldened parts) is outright invention, and “newspapers” is pretty loose; but these changes express what the poem is trying to say, or ought to be trying to

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16. The passing shout-out to Chicago as a spawning-ground of literary colossi is cute.
say in the estimation of its modern translator. “There are no Classics that are untrue” (9). The whole gist of *Classics Revisited* is that the plain-speaking and nonspecialist critic (i.e., Rexroth) is ideally set up to nose out the great works, to remind us of their truths and tell us why they matter, just by virtue of being in touch with his natural and universal humanity—as scholars in universities are not. By this reckoning, a literal translation would be pedantic and therefore “false”; free adaptation is not so much licensed as made a duty.

**Old Rhetorics, New Rhythms**

Irresistible as they must have been to Rexroth the self-styled outlaw intellectual, these convictions only go part of the way to explaining the extraordinary liberties Rexroth has felt entitled or even impelled to take with this particular source text. Instead, Rexroth has fallen under the spell of—or perhaps is ironically channeling as part of a deadpan poetic persona-game—a long tradition of egregious and feckless garbling of the Anthology under the pretext of accommodating its authors to contemporary sensibility. This tradition came with built-in obsolescence and is distinctly pre-Mackailian. Its hinterland is the early years of the nineteenth century; even then it was mocked, and by the turn of the century it was dead and buried . . . but every once in a while it would still lurch from the graveyard moaning for brains. The Anthology’s translator for the British mass market in 1929—Shane Leslie, a journeyman peddler of hand-me-down opinions of whatever vintage—glossed the epigrams of the Anthology as “read[ing] distantly from our civilisation, but a little modern dress brings some of them deliciously home. . . . The translations in this book are not always literal when they attempt the impressionism of the original”; and that attitude, peculiar to translators of the Anthology as of no other classical text, could justify all manner of mischief (1929, 9).

So, there is proto-Beat literary machismo in Rexroth’s comments and choices, to be sure, but also a certain toeing of the party line among translators of epigram, a pose of spontaneity that has hardened into a conventional mask. To his foreword (“these poems make no pretense of scholarship”; 1962, n.p.), compare closely Rice thirty-five years before (“Making no pretense to scholarship myself”; 1927, xvi)—but also, preceding Rice, the obscure Scottish translator Alexander Lothian (“I profess myself no very scientific student of

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17. On adaptive translation of the Anthology in the early nineteenth century and the severe criticism that it provoked in some quarters, see Nisbet 2013, 56–60, and cf. 290–93, on Frederic Wright’s cringeworthy *The Girdle of Aphrodite* (1923).
the Anthology”; 1920, n.p.) and, looser but decades down the line, Michael Kelly’s translations from the heterosexually erotic AP 5 (“At university what pedantry, what dry as dust . . . I read English Literature”; 1986, 7).

The translators’ rhetoric all points toward one conclusion: the Anthology’s ideal translator is unscholarly and even careless. Not only does he (and it is almost always a “he”) pay no regard to the form and content of his source—a source that in the Anthology’s peculiar case is postclassical and therefore “untrue”; he does his best work impressionistically, without even looking at the text. This kind of claim would shock readers of any other classical text in translation, but by Rexroth’s time what had begun as conscious and provocative paradox (in large part born from the backlash against Oxford Uranism) had ossified into a reflex habit of thought. It would not even do to be too good at Greek—that was what dons were good for, and what did dons know about Life as it was lived by real men?19

With Poems, epigram now hikes and rides the rails. Ever since learning Greek with Sappho, says Rexroth, and in dialogue with his Chinese influences, on the freight trains of my youthful years of wandering, in starlit camps in desert and mountain ranges, in snow-covered cabins, on shipboard, in bed, in the bath, in love, in times of loneliness and despair, in jail, while employed as an attendant for the insane, and on many other jobs and in many other places, the Anthology and the lyric poets of Greece have been my constant

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18. “Many of the translations came to me as I turned the Greek poem over in memory, with no text at all” (Rexroth 1962, n.p.)—compare, for example, to Lothian, whose habit it professedly was “in leisure times to carry [Mackail’s Greek editio minor] about with me, not in my pockets only, but in my head and heart” as he walked his native hills (1920, n.p.). Translators often justified mangling the Anthology by claiming that they were taking it back to its roots in Meleager’s Garland—not so much by reconstructing his lost book, but by themselves compiling the kind of selection they felt he ought to have been authoring, with scant regard for plausible chronology; see, for example, Neaves 1874, 14.

19. The Mackailians’ originary motive was tacit homophobia; Rexroth’s, the contrarian outsider’s contempt for institutionalized and theorized Eng. Lit. Cf. his grudge-airing remarks on academia’s unfitness to judge Mark Twain, conceived as his own ideal bohemian prototype in the 1959 essay reprinted in Assays (1961, 95). Kelly (1986, 8) continues the tradition, rhetorically counterpointing the bloodless, sexless Classics of the dons to his success at placing his own Anthology translations with the British men’s magazines, Mayfair and Club International. In the United States, I know of two Christmas special issues of Playboy (December 1969 and 1970) that have carried loose anonymous paraphrases from the Anthology as installments in the magazine’s long-running “Ribald Classics” series, illustrated by the talented freelancer Brad Holland.
companions. . . . Now they are moving away from me to the printed page and I will miss them terribly. (Rexroth 1962, n.p.)

As reported by Rexroth, the genre ticks off the activities and venues of Beat identity so thoroughly that one is amazed not to find the novels of Kerouac packed full of Simonides, Sappho, and Meleager. And again Rice is an important prototype for Rexroth’s conceits: “much joy and a little learning has gone to the making of these pages, which I am happy in sharing with others, though with a little sadness that my work, certainly for a time, is ended” (Rice 1927, xvii). Rice and Rexroth alike present turning the Anthology into English for our time as a personal work in progress: a work on the self, as much as for others; it is a happening.

As a translator of epigram at least, Rexroth seems to have no idea what a cliché he is being when he brags of bringing a free and lusty spirit to its text and finding there a modern attitude. He is the text’s ideal patsy—or just possibly is playing at being such, so straight-facedly as to own the role.

The remainder of this chapter brings these contextual strands together, in two sequential readings that explore how Poems frames its so-called “Greek Anthology.” We begin with an examination of how the book begins. How does Rexroth create expectations and coach his reader on how to experience “Anthology” within the strictures of his alphabetical scheme? We then conclude by examining how the book ends. How does he close Poems down, within these same strictures? The chapter then concludes with some brief remarks on the afterlife of Rexroth’s Anthology.

**How Poems Begins**

One lesson that classical texts teach us is that openings are important; they demand to be read carefully, and in the case of ancient classics are liable to be interpreted programmatically. In the case of a selection from a wider ancient corpus, editorial choices of structure and content amplify the drama. A sequential reading may be expected to inform on the individual translator’s practice as a conscious reversioner of the classic, and on how s/he apprehends and relates to the source text in question. In the case of Rexroth and the Anthology, we may also read in a further, implicit position-statement about his priorities. One consequence of choosing to arrange alphabetically is to

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20. Rexroth is at least setting up lots of plausible excuses, if we believe a word of any of this, for not having an edition of the Greek text to hand.
put all the anonymous poems under “A,” very near the start—and Rexroth has chosen to include a lot of them (twelve in all, or a ninth of the book). So Rexroth front-loads the collection with the spontaneous poetry of the common man—not that it *is* that, in all likelihood, but that is the story that his arrangement implicitly tells. His “Anthology” is a folk document, the opposite of academic.

Restless and discontent
I lie awake all night long.
And as I drowse in the dawn,
The swallows stir in the eaves,
And wake me weeping again.
I press my eyes close tight, but
Your face rises before me.
O birds, be quiet with
Your twittering accusations.
I did not cut that dead girl’s tongue.
Go weep for her lover in the hills,
Cry by the hoopoe’s nest in the rocks.
Let me sleep for a while, and dream
I lie once more in my girl’s arms.

AGATHIAS SCHOLASTICOS
(Rexroth 1962, 1)

The first epigram we meet, though, is by a named author: before Anonymous comes Agathias (AP 5.237), the Late Antique compiler of the *Cycle*, which was Cephalas’s largest source when he compiled “our” Greek Anthology several centuries later. The original is in book five of the Anthology, the heterosexual love poems. This is a powerfully simple version, and quite faithful, as well; of the small liberties taken, the preface has given us fair warning. In the original, “your face rises before me” is third-person, and gives a name instead of a face: “Again the thought of Rhodanthe haunts my heart.” Similarly, “I did not cut that dead girl’s tongue. / Go weep for her lover in the hills” is an oblique version of the original. Agathias supplies the names that identify the myth within its own cultural system—Philomela and Itys; Rexroth adds mystery and avoids antiquarianism by stripping them out. The reader likely comes away bamboozled by this gnomic utterance, but the lines make a memorable impression; it’s a good trade-off.
Dawn after dawn comes on the wine
Spilt on the books and music,
And on the stained and tumbled pillows.
And then, while we are paying
No attention, a black man comes,
And roasts some of us, and fries
Some of us, and boils some of us,
And throws us all in the dump.

AMMIANOS
(Rexroth 1962, 2)

The second epigram of Poems (AP 11.13) is from the Anthology’s eleventh book, which uniquely in its rather wobbly scheme contains two separate types of epigrams, which its compiler reasonably claims to be related: sympotic and “skoptic” (roughly speaking, satirical—in other words, a good source of after-dinner jokes and maxims). This is from the shorter, sympotic section at the front of the book. The author, Ammianus, is an Eastern Greek of the second century CE who is best known for his poems in the later, skoptic part of book eleven, where he is the master of the elaborate pun and play on words. Here, though, he expresses a straightforward sentiment characteristic of the symposium: drink and be merry, because life is short and enjoyment is fleeting. (The deaths by different methods of cooking are glossed by Paton in a footnote to his Loeb as deaths from disease: consumption, fever, and dropsy).

As previously, I embolden the invented material to clarify the extent and the libertine drift of the translator’s fabrications. The genitive absolute ἀμελούντων ἡμῶν, “while we are paying no attention,” is the jumping-off point for an elaborate ekphrasis in which the details are all Rexroth: the poem’s scene shifts from the rule-bounded and homosocial world of the ancient symposium to one of the soirées at which Rexroth regularly held court in San Francisco.

The other peculiar feature of this translation is in line 5: “A black man comes.” As in the opening poem—“I did not cut that dead girl’s tongue”—we could say this is Rexroth trimming detail in pursuit of lapidary mystique. In the Greek, the man is not black but purple, πορφύρεος—nor is he specified as a man. Instead, ὁ πορφύρεος is pretty clearly Death personified; when blood gushes it is πορφύρεος, and consequently πορφύρεος θάνατος is a

familiar formulation in Homer. In Ammianus’s Greek, our ultimate fate is the βάραθρον—the pit, or deep cleft in the rocks, into which Athenians hurled condemned criminals; by metaphorical extension, the word is used to mean “ruin” or “perdition.” When Rexroth (who himself was actively antiracist) has the “black man” dispose of his victims’ bodies in the “dump,” one pictures dead refrigerators and car crushers; the image evokes the milieu of organized crime and must have played uneasily against the backdrop of racial politics in 1960s America.

The third poem in Rexroth’s selection—the last before the Anonyma—is the end-product of a completely different kind of adaptation:

It is necessary that things
Should pass away into that from
Which they were born.
All things must pay
To each other the penalties
And compensations for all the
Inequalities wrought by time.

ANIXAMANDROS [sic]22
(Rexroth 1962, 3)

Its source text had never before kept company with any kind of “Greek Anthology,” however loosely conceived, for the simple reason that it is not a poem. Anaximander (sixth century BCE) was an early Greek philosopher, and one of the first Greeks to write in prose. All we have of him is this one citation, quoted by the Byzantine philosopher Simplicius over a thousand years later (sixth century CE).

To make matters worse, not all of this “poem” is even Anaximander’s. His words begin in line 4, “All things must pay. . . .” What Rexroth appears to have failed to realize is that his first three lines (which I embolden) are Simplicius presenting a proposition that he then illustrates by quoting Anaximander. Simplicius then marks the end of the quotation with a brief and snarky comment on Anaximander’s highfaluting style: “as he somewhat poetically says.” It is in this form that the fragment appears in editions, most obviously in Diels-Kranz’s fragments of the Presocratics.

If Rexroth, who “knows what the Greek says,” looked at the Greek even for a second, then the layout on the page must have made it very obvious

22. “Anixa-“ for “Anaxi-“ could be a typesetter’s error but is as likely to be the poet’s own misreading of his source.
that Anaximander’s dictum is not poetry—“somewhat poetically” just means Anaximander uses flowery language that Simplicius thinks would be more at home in epic. The most straightforward explanation would be that the translator has come to this text at second hand in his general reading on philosophy, and has misconstrued both Simplicius’s closing comment and the point at which the citation gets real: in other words, he has rewritten someone else’s translation and done so carelessly. There were already firm grounds—notably his evident incompetence with names—for not taking Rexroth at his word when he claimed to “know what the Greek says” and this looks like further corroboration. Or is it? Setting aside disciplinary rigor, a more relaxed reader could surmise that the assertion is not so much a truth-claim as a performance of vatic authority in the service of a poetic persona. An outright partisan might even claim that the poet misconstrues the fragment and its context deliberately and playfully, as part of his creative process; which interpretation we prefer ultimately comes down to readerly judgment and to the expectations (if any) about Rexroth’s talent and method with which we approach his palimpsestic text.

Ensuing poems in the early part of the book (there is no hard and fast rule by which one can call time on an “opening sequence,” per se) may be dealt with rather more summarily. Rexroth’s fourth choice is the first of his dozen Anonyma. Its source is a papyrus fragment in hexameters, P.Oxy.1.8, first published in 1898 and promptly assigned to either Alcman or Erinna. By the time Rexroth took it up, Maurice Bowra had called it for Erinna, in a work Rexroth (allegedly an aficionado of lyric) really ought to have known. However, reporting the fragment as “Anonymous” suits Rexroth’s narrative of the Anthology quite well; perhaps unknown to him, he is not the first of epigram’s modern exegetes to have found advantage in placing emphasis upon that very theme (Symonds, for one, leaned on it to flag up epigram’s authenticity as a human document).23

The fifth poem derives from a genuinely anonymous epigram, AP 5.201; Rexroth expands it a little, making an eight-liner out of a four-line original, but none of his elaborations are outrageous. His sixth choice too is genuinely anonymous; it has the look of another AP 5 epigram, but appearances can be deceptive. Wine spilled on stained and tumbled pillows, half the garden tracked into the bedroom—the real gone chicks of Poems will have a lot of housework to get through once they’re done taking care of their author’s sexual needs:

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23. Symonds (1920, 540–41), the closing comments of his chapter on epigram.
Flowers will do us no good on our tombstones;
Tears mixed with ashes only make mud.

Let’s move half the garden into the bedroom,
Roll about, and moan in unison.

ANONYMOUS
(Rexroth 1962, 6)

Again, the additions are emboldened. The first couplet condenses an anonymous, four-line sympotic epigram from early in book eleven (AP 11.8), where exhortations to live for today are par for the course—garlands of flowers are a classic party-goer’s accessory as well as an offering to the dead; the details are subtly updated (the mud of the original is from wine poured as a libation at the tomb, a custom we no longer keep). The second couplet, where “flowers” and “mud” cue up an earthy sex romp, has no source outside of Rexroth’s priapic imaginings. Through creative expansion, he has sent the source poem in an entirely new direction—again, did he but know it, a move for which precedent goes all the way back to Symonds in the 1870s.24

Before concluding this section, let us pause to note the themes on which Poems has so far touched—themes that we have seen are sometimes not those with which the poems started off in the Greek. They make quite a sequence: love, death, death, death, love; the seventh poem is an epitaph. The following five are love poems, and as before, love really means sex: “the wage of wantonness, / And the joys shared with lovers” (Rexroth 1962, 9).25 And the sequence cranks on thereafter, vacillating between the twin poles of elegiac cliche: love, love, death, love, love, death . . .

Conceived primarily in terms of male sexual entitlement, the erotic half of this thematic double-act is straight out of Wallace Rice, whose Pagan Pictures reimagined the Anthology as a hedgerow paradise of yielding maids and throbbing manhoods. (Rice also injected himself into the text in ways that upped the ante in the translator’s self-fashioning as a heroic intervener—Rexroth’s fabulations look almost modest when compared to his predecessor’s wholesale literary impersonations.)26 The morbid half is Mackail, whose canonic Select Epigrams gave inordinate weighting to thoughts of mortality.

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24. Ibid., 531, butchering Strato of Sardis AP 12.258; for discussion see Livingstone and Nisbet 2010, 146–47.
25. A poem that is both erotic and funereal (“But the blessings of many / Possessions I leave behind,” i.e., in death).
How Poems Ends

Behind the flutes and flowers change comes and the shadow of fate stands waiting. . . . For over all Greek life there lay a shadow . . . [in treating death], if anywhere, the Greek genius had its fullest scope and most decisive triumph; and here it is that we come upon the epigram in its inmost essence and utmost perfection. (Mackail 1890, 61, 64)

We may recall that Rexroth’s choice of organizational scheme—the notionally nonnarrative solution of arranging *Poems* alphabetically by name of author—was a world away from Mackail’s. *Select Epigrams* had proposed a more obviously prescriptive route through the Anthology’s content, reallocating its winnowed content under twelve thematic “chapters,” which the reader is invited to read sequentially; the intended upshot is a kind of morally uplifting and ultimately closural *Bildungsroman*. In Mackail’s scheme, mortal thoughts found their natural home in the closing chapters (effectively the last four of the twelve, or a whole third of *Select Epigrams*; did I mention that Mackail was morbid?).27 Rexroth, bound to alphabetization, ought not to be able to match this distribution—but he gives it his best shot.

There is an older context here, long predating Rexroth and Mackail both. From the earliest translators, explanations of the Anthology for English readers typically placed particular emphasis on the very same thematic binary—love and death—that we saw in Rexroth’s opening sequence. This had made intuitive sense to them because of the uses to which antiquity famously put elegy and the elegiac couplet. In Roman literature in particular, elegy became the meter of love-poetry, but its funerary uses were already long established. The origin of the elegiac mode was popularly supposed to lie in laments for the dead: the ancient etymology, ἐ ἐ λέγειν (to cry woe!, woe!), loses none of its imaginative force for being philologically implausible, because the scenario is intuitively evocative. Before epigram was epigram in a literary sense, it was ἐ πί-γραμμα—a text inscribed on a surface, which not infrequently would be that of a monument, which in turn would more often than not be funerary; and when epigram became a literary genre in the Hellenistic period, it began by taking existing inscriptive forms as models.

Early literary epigram also mimicked its lapidary prototypes at the level of compositional technique, pursuing highly iterative elaboration on (at first) a deliberately narrow range of themes and motifs. The result of these factors in combination is that there are more faux-epitaphic epigrams extant in the Anthology than any other single kind. The book in which the sepulchral poems are placed, AP 7, is longer (748 poems) than any other—and much longer than AP 5, the home of the heterosexual love poem (309 poems). The sepulchral poems are still very much a minority within the Anthology as a whole, but one would not think it from the rhetoric of the nineteenth-century translators, for whom the work’s whole purpose often seems to lie in decorous *memento mori*.

The size of AP 7 gives no real grounds to suppose that the Greeks were especially morbid—the mock-epitaph simply happened to get a head start on most of the other subgenres that comprised literary epigram—but in the shared rhetoric of the Anthology’s English afterlife, these poems became proof positive that the Greeks sensed the doom of their race. Death is the ever-present stranger at the feast—a feast conceived in alluringly Alma-Tadema-esque terms (flute-girls and flowers) in the quotation from Mackail with which this section began. And Mackail’s formulation quickly became the decisive gloss on their lesson to modernity—a modernity which looked back to ancient Hellas for inspiration but need not share its sadness, because it knew salvation through the word of Christ. (That most of the authors of the Anthology are inconveniently of Roman or later date is a small detail easily elided once the rhetoric starts flowing.) Much of the introductory matter of *Select Epigrams* is expended on talking up Greek morbidity, and we have seen how the basic structure of Mackail’s selection influentially gave pride of place to death and its inevitability. Epigram in his calculatedly quote-worthy summation was

a metre which could refuse nothing, which could rise to the occasion and sink with it, and be equally suited to the epitaph of a hero or the verses accompanying a birthday present, a light jest or a profound moral idea, the sigh of a lover or the lament over a perished Empire. (Mackail 1890, 6)

It is in this light—the modern Anglophone reception of the Anthology as a meditation on love and death, but especially death—that we now wind up our encounter with Rexroth’s collection.

Rexroth’s column on the Anthology for *Classics Revisited* reveals how much he has bought into Mackail’s old rhetoric that turned Greek funerary epigram into the symptom of a culture fixated on its own decorous demise:
Melancholy saturates the later poets of the *Anthology* and even tinctures Meleager. . . . It is simply a more somber, more continuously haunting realization of the final term of the good, the true, the beautiful—and of the self and of civilization itself. (Rexroth 1986, 59)

Accordingly, the last ten poems of his selection are all to do with tombs, memorials for the dead, the inexorability of fate, and how soon our lives will be over. This reenactment of the narrative trajectory from *Select Epigrams* is no small achievement given that Rexroth has committed to an alphabetical structure; he must find examples that hit the right notes while still being written by poets whose names fall near enough to “Z.”

Simonides is well represented here, with four poems (it is convenient that “s” falls late-ish in the alphabet). Accordingly, *Poems* includes a suitably spare version of his greatest hit, “Go tell it to the Spartans” (Rexroth 1962, 106). The last of the Simonidean quartet is an epitaph for Anacreon, with the faux-scholastic attribution, “Simonides, Antipatros [sic], and Others.” Despite appearances, this is not an ancient collaboration. The Anthology contains a flurry of literary epitaphs for Anacreon (AP 7: 23–33), and what Rexroth has done is rifle through Paton’s Loeb translations and throw together an impressionistic pastiche using whatever phrases strike him as evocative. For motives which may again be left to individual readerly speculation, he appears to have turned a blind eye to the facing Greek text.28

Following the Simonidean extracts, the closing roster heads into the Anthology’s outfield of one-hit wonders. First up is the dazzlingly obscure “Sulpicius Lupercus Servasius Jr.” whose poem (four from the end) I reproduce here in Rexroth’s version:

Rivers level granite mountains.
Rains wash the figures from the sundial.
The plowshare wears thin in the furrow;
And on the fingers of the mighty,
The gold of authority is bright
With the glitter of attrition.

28. See Rexroth (1962, 107). For example, “wine bibber” is from Paton’s AP 28; “the white marble,” Paton on AP 30. We know Rexroth leaned on Loeb translations when translating classical authors; see Ben Pleasants’s memoir of his visit with Rexroth in 1976, http://www.thiscanthappen.net/node/562?page=4 (last accessed November 9, 2016). There is no shame in a literary author offering a “translation” based on a literal rendering by a Greek scholar—recent successes include David Grieg, whose *Bacchae* for the National Theatre of Scotland (2008) was no less acclaimed for his frank admission that he worked from a literal translation by the Glasgow classicist Ian Ruffell. Accordingly, one could wish that Rexroth had been honest about his process and not tried to brazen it out.
Servasius is a poet of the fifth century, par for the course given the translator’s long-established penchant for trawling Late Antique Latin authors for hints of decline. Rexroth probably came across him in the Oxford Book of Latin Verse, where this poem is given the very apt heading, “The Work of Time.” Its themes are alluringly antiestablishment, at least by the time Rexroth is through with them; Servasius gives us three four-line stanzas of which Rexroth attempts only the second half, so we join the poem one-and-a-half stanzas in. The original is much more clearly a priamel, a persuasive list of examples illustrating the theme proposed at its outset, which is universal entropy:

\[
\text{Omne quod Natura parens creauit,}
\text{quamlibet firmum uideas, labascit . . .}
\]

Everything that mother Nature has brought into being, however permanent it might look to you, is falling apart.

In other words, this did not begin as a poem about the crumbling of “authority” at all; only through selection and omission does it become in Poems the classical-or-thereabouts prototype of Dylan’s “the times, they are a changing.” The effect is smartly achieved.

Next up is Thymocles, perhaps the most obscure of the poets of the Garland of Meleager; this epigram on the fleeting nature of youth and beauty (AP 12.32), translated faithfully by Rexroth, is his only extant poem. Tymnes follows, another Garland poet with rather more of an Anthology presence—seven epigrams in all, four of them funerary. This one is a beautiful and haunting version of AP 7.211, one of two epitaphs for animals that are preserved under his name among the Anthology’s literary epitaphs:

\[
\text{Eumelos had a Maltese dog.}
\text{He called him Bull. He was the most}
\text{Loyal dog that ever lived.}
\text{His bark comes faintly up from Hell,}
\text{Lost on the night-bound roads.}
\]

\text{TYMNES}

(Rexroth 1962, 109)
Last of all comes Zonas, a poet of the Garland of Philip (first century CE) of whom nine epigrams survive in various styles; this is his only extant sympotic poem and combines the themes of wine and death. Combined with a repetition ("earth") that is not there in the original, the double sense Rexroth draws out of "bore" (gave birth) and "bear" (carry) helps his version pack more punch than its rather conventional source text, AP 11.43:

Pass me the sweet earthenware jug,
Made of the earth that bore me,
The earth that someday I shall bear.

ZONAS
(Rexroth 1962, 111)

Since Rexroth includes no end matter, this is his Anthology’s literal last word, and he has chosen to go out with a poem from the twelfth and final chapter of Select Epigrams (12.13 in Mackail’s scheme): “Give me the sweet cup wrought of the earth from which I was born, and under which I shall lie dead.” The Greek that Mackail translates as “cup,” κύπελλον, is specifically a “big-bellied drinking-vessel, beaker, goblet” in the standard Greek lexicon of Liddell and Scott, at home in scenes of Homeric feasting; later is it used of receptacles for milk; perhaps on this occasion, Rexroth really does “know what the Greek says”?

More likely, I think, he supersizes his drink because a cup is just too respectable and bourgeois for the self-image of the outlaw intellectual. At the 6 Gallery reading of Howl, the wine was legendarily slurped straight from gallon jugs, a detail immortalized in the mildly fictionalized and very famous retelling of the evening in Kerouac’s Dharma Bums. Witnesses recall that Kerouac led the audience response, beating time on an empty wine jug as Ginsberg declaimed:

Everyone was there. It was a mad night. And I was the one who got things jumping by going around collecting dimes and quarters from the rather stiff audience standing around in the gallery and coming back with three huge gallon jugs of California Burgundy and getting them all piffed so that by eleven o’clock when Alvah Goldbrook was reading his wailing poem “Wail” drunk with arms outspread everybody was yelling “Go! Go! Go!” (like a jam session) and old Rheinhold Cacoethes [Kerouac’s cipher for Rexroth] the father of the Frisco poetry scene was wiping tears in gladness.

Meanwhile scores of people stood around in the darkened gallery strain-
group to group, facing them and facing away from the stage, urging them
to slug from the jug. . . . “Great, hey Rosie?” I yelled, and she took a big slug
from my jug and shined eyes at me. (Kerouac 1958, 13–14)

This is the second jug of wine we have met in Poems: the first was the “gal-
lopping wine-jug” of Antipater AP 11.23, toward the start of the book. That first
jug had no basis in the Greek at all, which merely specified wine. Où sont les
neiges . . .

The Afterlife of Poems

Like Pierre Louys’s Chansons de Bilitis (1894), Rexroth’s confection fooled
some of the people, some of the time—especially if they were predisposed
to be taken in. Astonishingly, Chester Starr’s popular History of the Ancient
World—first published in 1965, when Poems was the latest and funkiest “Greek
Anthology” to hand, and now in its fourth edition—is still recommending
Rexroth’s Anthology as a translation, alongside the versions of Dudley Fitts,
for students of ancient history keen to get a sense of what ancient epigram was
like. Did Starr have no idea that Poems was less a “translation” than a creative
riff on a part-antique theme? More likely he chose to turn a blind eye; Fitts’s
versions, after all, explicitly bill themselves as paraphrases. It is probably no
coincidence that Starr promotes these two poets as a double act: Fitts’s period
of creative engagement with the Anthology was spent as a New Directions
author.30 And it is only the Greek Anthology, so who cares?

Rexroth’s legacy as a translator of Greek epigram is zealously curated by
his latter-day acolytes. An essay by the artist and writer Gregory McNamee,
“When We with Sappho” (never published in print as far as I can tell, but
widely disseminated online), takes at face value the roster of authors in Poems
as a full and faithful record of the actual Anthology’s contents: Martial and
Petronius are now members in good standing. This flies rather in the face
of the mumbled admissions of Rexroth’s own prologue: “Had Rexroth been
French or Swedish, he might have been honored by his government with a

30. See Starr 1991, 432. Fitts’s postwar efforts, notably (1957), are recycled from his shorter
books of 1938 and 1941, both under the same New Directions banner as Rexroth. In Vosper’s
subject review (1951, 91–92), the early efforts of Rexroth and Fitts on the Anthology are paired
stylistically.
medal and a nomination to some closed society of belles-lettres for having recovered a literary monument.  

McNamee buys Phoenix’s rhetoric of decline as straight reportage of the intent of the Anthology’s Byzantine compiler, or even of its sampled Hellenistic and Late Antique authors (“the Codex Palatinus documents the decline of Greek civilization in the Mediterranean”). His account of the history of the Anthology’s publication is entertainingly imaginative—did you know the Greek text was only first published in 1911? “It befits his wide-ranging intellectual curiosity that Kenneth Rexroth somehow found the modern European edition, long before the Loeb Classical Library saw to it that an American edition was made available”: not only his curiosity, but his unique ability to bend time.

The reviewer of the 1999 reissue of Poems for the Bryn Mawr Classical Review, meanwhile—Otto Steinmayer, a classicist with sidelines in English Literature and comparative studies—was going all out to channel Rexroth in his prime:

Kenneth Rexroth’s Poems from the Greek Anthology has been by me nearly twenty years, and I welcome the reissue. In my role of Common Reader, I take the sincerest pleasure in Rexroth’s poetry. I go back to his translations and his own poems time and time again, and have some of them by heart. As scholar, after long acquaintance, I have found no flaw in his handling of Greek; rather the opposite.

When poems work, when words become charmed, it is easy to overpraise them, and to review them in the usual sense is to risk the hybris of tampering with the Muse.

Steinmayer, too, believes or affects to believe in Martial as a Greek poet. Rexroth’s loose ways with his sources are excused as “you’re not reading it right”:

Yet for all that, Rexroth was a poet of ripe modernism (he midwifed the Beat movement), he followed the tradition of the greatest English translators from

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31. For example, at http://www.gregorymcnamee.com/articles_and_other_writing/when_we_with_sappho_essay.pdf (last accessed November 9, 2016).
32. W. R. Paton’s facing-text translation of the Anthology for the Loeb Classical Library appeared in five volumes between 1916 (not 1911) and 1918, when Rexroth was still a child. European publications of the text did indeed precede it, beginning in 1494 and becoming comprehensive and accessible with Friedrich Jacobs’s edition for the Tauchnitz series in 1813–17.
the classics. Like theirs, his ideal reader knew Greek, and Rexroth always invites us knowingly to study the play of original and translation.

(Never mind that, in the edition published in his lifetime, Rexroth gave his readers no clue as to where in the Anthology’s 4,000-odd poems—if at all—any given “original” might be found.)

Where now for Poems? Michigan’s commitment to the Ann Arbor Paperbacks will surely keep it in print long into the future, and thanks to the advocacy of its core fandom it may well continue to hoodwink the unwary into thinking it has much of anything to do with a curious Byzantine compilation called the Greek Anthology; it’s a book that inspires peculiar passion. Besides, Rexroth’s versions are direct and forceful; his distinctive poetic voice is ageing well, and when he chooses or happens to be approximately faithful (hard to say which on any occasion; even a stopped clock tells the right time twice a day), he is still worth quoting even by classicists. As poet and bullshitter alike, Rexroth’s considerable talent deserves some posterity, and there is every chance that this elegant semi-imposture will be his most lasting monument.

Bibliography


34. Not many academic reviewers would go on, as Steinmayer did, to post a five-star review on Amazon: “Worthy to stand with Ben Jonson—Kenneth Rexroth is the best translator of the Greek Anthology since the Renaissance.” Rexroth’s groupies can be quite intense; see the essays and other resources amassed at the fan site, http://www.bopsecrets.org/rexroth/ (last accessed November 9, 2016).


