

LUDOVICO ARIOSTO, *Orlando furioso. A new verse translation*, translated by David R. Slavitt, introduction by Charles S. Ross, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2009 (Paperback, 2011), pp. 672.

David R. Slavitt has been playing fast and loose with the literary classics since the early 70s when he brought us free adaptations of the *Eclogues* and *Georgics of Virgil*, both of which present the original masterworks as filtered through – to put it in his words – the «radically improvisational» lens of the translator. In fact, Slavitt openly refers to these early works not as translations per se, but rather as «verse essays», in which he riffs playfully on the original texts. As renderings into English of Virgil's Latin, his translations of both the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics* represent an act of reading, a lively engagement with the original poems, as he transposes them from the distant and antique to the conversational and everyday. They do more to escort us through a reading of the poems than they do to present us with the original texts to read on our own. Shot through with the translator's commentary, dominated by paraphrase and dressed with satirical discussions of the propositional content of the originals, Slavitt's creations are not translations in any traditional sense. In bringing the uninitiated into uniquely colloquial contact with these timeless classics, they do, however, actually amount to pleasantly entertaining romps with the bucolic Virgil.

Now available in paperback, Slavitt's new verse translation of Ariosto's under-appreciated renaissance epic, *Orlando furioso*, is no exception to his tendency to incorporate his own cheeky commentary into the fabric of a canonical author's text. He makes himself (and his voice) at home not only in the form but also in the material at hand, since Ariosto similarly makes us aware of the voice of the narrator from the outset, likening his own labors in life to the hardships endured by his titular character. And so, he actually translates the *Orlando furioso* into the style of Ariosto, whose text additionally claims to be the transcription of another text by Charlemagne's scribe Turpin, which is a trope, a classic convention of the genre. In Slavitt's hands we get another layer added to the already multifaceted original. His additions in the voice of the translator are most often articulated in a colloquial register in the form of off-the-cuff re-

marks that inevitably almost always stand out from the rest of the texture of the poem, as in the following couplet, for example: «He skewered Polinesso with his lance, / Like a shish-ka-bob. (You've had one of these, perchance?)» (V, 85). This is Slavitt's typical method of making the work he translates new and fresh and immediate.

In his early freestyle Poundian adaptations of Virgil, mentioned above, he engages in this kind of colloquializing. In his 2009 edition of Boccaccio's *Bucolics*, he reserves his commentary, that ranges from the editorializing to the explanatory, for interjections that appear in italics only between stanzas in order to distance them from our understanding of the scope and feel of the original. Ariosto, on the other hand, seems to have given him license to return to his mode of playing a little looser with his source material, wresting it from its original maker and making it more his own instead. In most cases, one does not come to a Slavitt translation to get to the core propositional content of the great original works of literary art he has translated, but rather to peruse one extremely prolific translator's attempt to channel the spirit of the original into one that is current to today's world. Almost everything he translates bears the mark of his quirky personality and quick-witted sensibility, which doesn't necessarily speak to everybody.

At his best Slavitt propagates the colloquial spontaneous playfulness of a poet like Lord Byron, to whom he has been widely compared, but metrically and in terms of prosody they couldn't be more different. Metrically Byron and Ariosto adhere strictly to their ten and eleven syllable lines respectively, while Slavitt has the tendency to bend the rules. He adopts an elastic version of iambic pentameter that allows his rendition to proceed at a prosier pace wherever he sees fit. His verses range indiscriminately in length from nine to twelve and, occasionally, even thirteen syllables. Freeing his verses from any dominant verse length, he circumvents the risk of his iambic pentameter falling into the stereotypical sing-song pattern that plagues the standard simpleton's wielding of the form. He exempts himself from this danger.

«Most arts», writes Pound, «attain their effect by using a fixed element and a variable». In Slavitt's rendition of Ariosto the fixed element – his rhymed octaves, which are only loosely iambic, let alone pentameter – is constantly in conflict with the variable of the prosody and its entirely sporadic use of enjambment between verses as well as stanzas. At their best his metrical variants are expressive and add a stylistic flair of vitality to the narration, in lesser moments they merely serve to hasten the reader's forward progress through the narrative. There is a greater density of such hang-ups in the first few cantos of the translation, which the reader has to tolerate before the poem begins to flow more smoothly.

The angel moves the army which is far  
 from Paris to the capital city where  
 they can reinforce the brave army of Char-  
 lemagne. And he accomplishes this in one  
 day. Who can imagine how it was done? (XIV, 95, vv. 4-8).

Here Slavitt undermines the regularity of the meter at every line break. The first quoted line breaks expressively. Ending the verse on an enjambment with «far» heightens the feeling of distance once the reader's eye arrives at the beginning of the next line. In an enjambment of this sort, the content and the form operate in perfect harmony. It leaves you hanging, pushing off at the end of a verse, mimicking the physicality of the content. This effect built into the prosody of the verses then contrasts to the enjambment that follows two lines later, between the words «one» and «day» where the effect is meant to imply speed and haste, emphasizing the quickness with which the deed was done. «One / day» with its heroic quickness and the short time he took to get it done all of a sudden forces the eye to jump quickly to the next line to complete the sentence.

Between these two unique, though also rather successfully expressive line breaks, we find one of the stranger, more disruptive enjambments, one that splits a proper name in two, and its not just any name. It's «Char- / lemagne», and this is very strange. It is baffling because at first glance it seems to alienate the reader, to draw attention to the absurdity of the translator's imperative to be so subservient to the regular dictates of the rhyme scheme that he is forced to squeeze a rhyme out mid-word. Upon further inspection, however, it is indeed Charlemagne's army that is broken and in need of reinforcement. So the line break serves as a uniquely expressive extension of the content of the verses.

The otherwise very rigid form of *ottava rima* in Slavitt's highly experienced hands takes on a malleability that few others have achieved with it. Even the great satirical voice of Byron is far more end-stopped than Slavitt ever is. Take this entertaining octave by Byron, an addendum to his *Don Juan*:

I would to heaven I were so much clay,  
As I am blood, bone, marrow, passion, feeling –  
Because at least the past were pass'd away –  
And for the future – (but I write this reeling,  
Having got drunk exceedingly to-day,  
So that I seem to stand up on the ceiling)  
I say – the future is a serious matter –  
And so – for God's sake – hock and sodawater!

Slavitt is, in fact, rarely as end-stopped as Byron, or even Ariosto for that matter, in whose lines the regularity of the rhyme and its impetus always makes itself felt. While Byron is the English poet whose name is most synonymous with the poetic form of the *ottava rima* and he notoriously manages to fill this form with cascades of colloquial language, it is less for his prosody than for his uncanny ability to inject his own sardonic wit that Slavitt's rendition of Ariosto elicits such comparison.

Although Slavitt maintains the rhyme of the *ottava*, his prosody is sometimes quite awkward though it often touches on the experimental. One of the

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<sup>1</sup> LORD BYRON, *Don Juan*, «On the back of the Poet's MS. of Canto I», in *Poetical Works*, Londond, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 635.

sloppier examples of the kind of free-form, constant enjambment that one simply never finds in Byron is the following, as just one among dozens of other possible examples:

After a pause, he admitted that that was the *whole*  
 story. He had no other proofs or *need*  
 for any. He had expected none from a *soul*  
 as pure and fine as hers. He said that *he'd*  
 be content to wait until their *goal*  
 of holy wedlock was reached – as God decreed.  
 To ask for anything further would be wrong,  
 although he hoped the wait would not be too long. (V, 35)

The whole thing from the entirely unnecessary Elmer Fudd effect of the double “that” in the first line to the senseless and inexpressive line breaks that enjamb like a waterfall without any relationship to the content itself feels amateurish and unrefined. (I have put the awkward enjambments in italics.) The resulting widowed bits of sentence that end up at the start of each line are flat and lacking in any dramatic or poetic content. Yet, the rhyme persists though it ends up being entirely camouflaged by the translator’s insistence on not end-stopping his lines which necessarily draws attention to form and antiquated things like rhyme and the regular beat of what might otherwise tend toward those all too familiar iambic incarnations of pentameter verse. Just compare the first six verses of this stanza with the rhymed couplet in the end, which are end-stopped and both have eleven syllabus though they are more verbose («to ask for anything further»), less economical («although he hoped the wait would not be too long»), than your standard iambic pentameter line. The word combination «to ask for anything further» is a mouthful of colloquial language that thwarts the standard sing-song progression. His prosody is uniquely experimental, often in ways that will not appeal to everybody all the time.

Is it sloppiness on the part of the translator? Or is his mess intentional? Might it be that he derails the relationship between form and content on purpose in order to distract the reader from a mere antiquarian appreciation of the form, distracting us from the artifice of the poetry, drawing more attention to the feast of narrative pleasure that the content of the poem itself has in store for us? His prose-informed tendency to enjambment allows the syntactical content to flow freely from one verse to the next with the result that the reader effortlessly moves along and is not so incessantly focused on the pacing of the rhymes. In fact, rhymes often sneak up on the reader or even go unnoticed, as they do not foreground the form or draw unnecessary attention to it, which is a genius solution for breathing a breath of new life into long narrative poetry for a readership that tends to overlook or write off narrative in verse.

After thirty years of experience the Slavitt *oeuvre* boasts an impressive catalogue of translations that includes a broad swath of the major classical Greek and Roman authors, as well as smattering of medieval and early modern French and Italian writers. We are, thus, in the hands of an experienced master, and an extremely prolific one at that, no matter how eccentric he might be. In just the

last year alone, *annus mirabilis*, he came out with new translations of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and Dante's *Vita nuova*, not to mention volumes entitled *The Gnat and Other Minor Poems of Virgil*, *The Love Poems*, *Letters and Remedies of Ovid* and *Milton's Latin Poems*. In 2012 he's due out with an edition of Petrarch's *Sonnets and Shorter Poems*. And this is not even touching on the creative work of his own he has published of late. Each of these of works are translated in a uniquely different way. While what I imagine to be Slavitt's wry wit can leak through from time to time, it really only does in those works that treat their source material more freely, as he is capable of hitting all the right profoundly solemn notes in his recent rendition of the *Theban Plays of Sophocles*. The diversity of his metrical and structural strategies from one translation challenge to the next, his tone and his modernist and postmodernist approaches to each of these different works serve to remind us that Slavitt is fully present behind the intentions and the decisions that go into everything he does as a translator.

I am inclined to give Slavitt the benefit of the doubt, as this kind of performance is genuinely limited to this work. In other translations he is truly far more regular and end-stopped than he ever is here. His swift and satirical poetic gait makes Ariosto's massive masterpiece lighter (despite its cumbersome length) than much of his dryer competition in both prose and verse. I am delighted to see that his some thirty odd years of experience as a translator has served to allow him to take risks like this. Not every whimsical translator out there has the privilege of being able to be so presumptuous, to play so fast and free with the classics and still be published by the Harvard University Press. This is indeed a highly enviable position to occupy at any point in someone's career. We should be grateful to have translators like Slavitt injecting new life into the classics. It is a gift for those who have the time and the inclination and, perhaps in some cases more than others, the patience to tag along for the ride he has so exuberantly deigned to take us on.

In a poem several thousand lines long, Ezra Pound famously remarked, «the first requirement is that the reader be able to proceed»,<sup>2</sup> and the conviction that poetry can be fun is something that is deeply rooted in Slavitt's style. He says in his preface that he wanted to produce a poem that could be read with pleasure in English. Since his stated intention is to bring this poetic narrative to life for people unaccustomed to reading poetry, I find, however, that in those instances in which his poetry becomes the clunkiest and most bogged down with unnecessary prepositions and other wordy baggage all the translator would have had to do is cull from the original any number of minor details that would only help to fill out his prosody and save him from having to make some of his most awkward line breaks, especially those that only serve to draw attention to

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<sup>2</sup> EZRA POUND, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, New York, New Directions, 1968, p. 207. Pound famously noted that the reader's inability to proceed is one of the faults of Chapman's Homer: «You plunge into adjectival magnificence and get stuck. You have two or more pages of admiration, and then wait to regather your energies or you acquire a definite impression of Chapman's English, and very little of Iliad».

the poetic artifice that he at other moments so masterfully manages to camouflage with the «prosey» free-flowing touch he so productively cultivates elsewhere, making the narrative so immensely pleasurable and immediate, so extremely accessible and readable, which is the most that this edition can hope to add to the current offerings on the market. Barbara Reynolds' impressive translation, also in rhymed verse, is perhaps too predominately end-stopped and stilted in its high poetic inversions and inventory of literary effects to be immediately appealing to the common reader.

While his is not a verbatim, word-for-word translation, he does in large part manage to transfer the gist of the narrative content of each individual octave right over into his own text. The numbers on his stanzas match the original numbers. This, however, does not mean that he can by any means be relied on as a crib to assist the struggling student to square up their understanding of the Italian original. Guido Waldman's prose translation is widely considered the best trot available on the market at the moment, whereas Slavitt sacrifices far too much of the intricacies of the poetry of the original to be of any assistance in untangling Ariosto's poetic touch in terms of his language, form and content. That said, he never adds or omits enough to fall out of step with the length and pacing of the original. Ariosto is simply able to accomplish far more than Slavitt in any given verse in terms poetic effect, imagery, reference and feeling. In fact, this is perhaps where I find the biggest fault with his effort.

His personal touch often comes at the cost of a simplification of key subtleties that add important colors and that are often tied to salient narrative details and themes. One example is found at the end of Canto X, in the moment in which Ruggiero attempts to rape Angelica, the damsel in distress whom he has only just rescued. He lands his flying steed, the hippogryph, in what seems to be an idyllic place, which is described in Slavitt's rendition as the following:

[...] Near the beach is an oak grove and flying about  
are nightingales. It's protected and out of the way,  
with a sweet water spring in a meadow and, no doubt,  
other attractions, but these are not his concerns.  
He dismounts at once and immediately turns

to her, whom he would most like to mount. But first  
there's all this armor, with ties, and buckles, and straps,  
this way and that. [...] (X, 113-14)

Notice how his enjambment here spans from one stanza to the next. This is an occurrence all too rare in Ariosto's original. But I cite these verses for another reason. What he renders as nightingales flying about is something slightly different and considerably richer in the original. In the Italian the «oak grove» is described as the place: «dove ognor par che Filomena piagna», which Reynolds more accurately translates as: «where Philomel's lament is heard again». In his attempt to simplify the description, he removes the mythological reference that may need a footnote. Rather than follow the Robert Graves method of seamlessly folding the substance of explanatory glosses into the translated

text itself, Slavitt here opts to simplify the reference by translating Philomel as the bird into which she was transformed in the myth, namely a nightingale, which naturally makes the *locus amoenus* even more romantic, which is not what this moment calls for. We are in a place of danger. Philomel was after all transformed after she was raped and in Ariosto's image she is seen to be crying, hence we are in the aftermath of the terrible transgression, whereas Slavitt's nightingales are neither singing nor crying, they're simply flying about, which turns them, if anything, into symbols of freedom. This is a strange inversion of the image. Angelica is, after all, about to be raped if she doesn't take advantage of the time Ruggiero wastes as he bumbles with his armor, which he cannot seem to get off by himself. The loss of the reference does not necessarily affect the basic propositional content of this particular dramatic moment in the narrative, but a certain attention to the details that are found throughout the literary texture of Ariosto's narrative fabric is lacking. The nightingale is not immediately synonymous with rape in quite the same way the name of the mythological victim is. The crying of Philomel only heightens the pathos of the scene and broadens the scope of the episode's implications.

Perhaps the most tragic transgression exacted on the text in Slavitt's edition is the excessive omissions the integrity of the text as a whole suffers in his stewardship. What is the uninitiated reader missing out on in these omissions? Readers end up missing out on the progressive epic peeling back of the otherwise cornucopia of layers that make up the romance adventure aspects of so much of the first two-thirds of Ariosto's center-less plot. Slavitt misleads modern readers into thinking that Orlando exerts a larger gravitational pull on the flow of the plot than he actually does in the poem in all of its resplendent integral glory. His abbreviated version hones more clearly in on the main threads of the second half of the poem, but leaves out many important details particularly the fourth quarter developments in Ruggiero's character. Lest we forget, Ruggiero is, after all, the center of the dynastic line of the poem, the Aeneas figure, and, thus, the agent of the poem's epic climax.

While he claims the cuts were motivated by financial concerns, the decisions on what to keep and what to leave out fall right in line with early criticisms of the poem. Early readers were reluctant to accept Ariosto's tapestry text, especially in the wake of the rediscovery of Aristotle's poetics and its effect on the literary critical debate of the period immediately following the runaway success of Ariosto's romance epic. It was widely noticed and hotly discussed that Ovidian abundance is slowly abandoned for Virgilian teleology, romance is eclipsed by the desire for epic conclusion, which are the two poles, acting as organizational principles, at odds with each another right up to the end of the original layout of the poem. All of this tension is virtually lost in Slavitt's abridged rendition.

For a poem ostensibly about Orlando, it is natural for readers to wonder why the titular character is so conspicuously missing from more than half the poem. Readers of Slavitt's abridgment will come away with the slightly misleading impression that the poem is indeed more centered on the madness and return to sanity of the lovesick Christian paladin, Orlando, rather than the Sara-

cen knight and founder of the Este line, Ruggiero. Trimming away entire thematic threads and whole swatches of the narrative fabric, the focus of the original shifts with the effect that in some cases minor episodes, like the Zerbino and Isabella plot that is followed to its end, achieve as a result a certain prominence as though it were a key episode in the forward movement of the plot of the poem as Slavitt has refocused it. In the original it tends to get lost as yet another installment in the theme-and-variation progression of one of the poem's main themes.

For a Harvard University Press title it also rather inconveniently lacks any kind of apparatus with guides to the intricate plot. I suppose the logic behind this decision is that most of these resources are already out there and are available in the Reynolds translation and so there was no sense in repeating it, despite the fact that they would potentially be of most assistance to the lay reader, to whom this edition is marketed. Reynolds' two volume paperback edition with Penguin provides the reader with an array of useful catalogues of characters and themes, meticulously compiled maps and even more surprisingly diagrams of many of the key battles. Slavitt only gives us a list of the *dramatis personae* in an appendix to aid his reader in navigating their way through Ariosto's notoriously convoluted narrative fabric, bursting with a vast cast of characters.

So, Slavitt's new translation fills a gap in the Ariosto market giving us a popularizing version, wearing the *gravitas* of renaissance epic on its sleeve, though easy just to read for its story once you've grown accustomed to the often flamboyant, satirical editorializing of the narrative voice. As someone who works on Ariosto and the chivalric epic, I have long wanted to see Ariosto find an expanded readership in order to engender renewed interest in the romance epics of the high Italian renaissance. While many readers might not be hip on Slavitt's sometimes frivolously simple, even puerile voice and might roll their eyes more than once at the frame of reference he introduces with his anachronistic interjections and the flippant quality of some of his downright silly jokes, his solution to the problem of form in translating Ariosto's playful narrative poetry is in some ways more successful at bringing the text and its material to life in a contemporary way than other recent translators working in the genre, like Anthony M. Esolen, who in his 2000 translation of Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* opted to forego the rhyme on odd lines in every octave. To quote the translator in his preface to the 1990 reissue of his Virgilian free adaptations, which I find fitting also for this occasion: «If this version can attract for these poems the attention of appropriate readers, it will have done, on both sides, a great service». Would that such readers find their way out of the woodwork!

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