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Joyce, Trevor. *Fastness: A Translation from the English of Edmund Spenser*. Miami UP, 2017. xxiv, 85 pp. ISBN 9781881163619. \$17, paper.

The translation, or poetic metaphrase, of classic poems has had a pronounced vogue in recent years. Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* and *Testament of Cresseid*, Simon Armitage's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Death of King Arthur* and *Pearl* recharge ancient texts while underlining those writers' affiliations to the Medieval tradition. More radically, Lavinia Greenlaw's *A Double Sorrow* is an abbreviated paraphrase, or palimpsest, of *Troilus and Criseyde*, while Alice Oswald's *Memorial* brilliantly condenses the *Iliad* to a freeze-frame litany of Homer's dead.¹ Trevor Joyce's *Fastness* is emphatically in the latter camp: this is a text which aims to be an adversarial retelling of *The Mutabilitie Cantos*.

Much about *Fastness* depends on the interplay between its polemical introduction and the new text. The introduction is both a manifesto and a clarification of Joyce's practice as a 'translator'. His aim was to produce 'another poem that picks up the carefully distributed threads of Spenser's utterance and gives them back radically altered in many ways, but recognizably chiming with the original, and adding new meaning' (xv). Such an approach gives him significant latitude in terms of style and semantics, underpinning a reading of the *Cantos* which is at once determined yet tendentious. For Joyce, Spenser's text is an authoritarian myth which mimics poetically the political position of *A View of the Present State of Ireland*: 'In terms of the contest outlined in the *Cantos*, the *View* itself aligns with Jove's scheme of things: what we have we will hold by any means necessary' (xiv).

This reading has implications for the new poem's use of language. Joyce allegorizes Spenser's style as further evidence of his literary politics:

He chooses to make his rebel, even in the act of rebellion, subject to the language of governance. This is a way, I'd suggest, to put her in her place right from the beginning, before she even leaves it. (xvi)

Though the point isn't fully developed, Joyce implies that Spenser's stanza form and poetic rhetoric are irretrievably 'subject to' the language of power in a way that distantly recalls the New Historicist containment thesis. And though citing Richard Helgerson, there is nothing constrained or contained about Joyce's view of the potential of his own language (xxii, n.12). While mirroring Spenser's 'artificial dialect', Joyce adopts modern slang, jargon and vulgarisms 'to resist authority' and 'to make a better case for Mutability, and to allow her, now, a jury of her peers' (xvi). The implication is clear: literary rhetoric of the kind in which Spenser excels betokens his subservience to imperial ideology. Thus rhyme and iambic cadence are largely abandoned: Spenser is modernized into a range of stanza forms (usually of eight lines, but sometimes as short as six and as long as twelve), while rhythm is more conversational and less predictable.

This approach to Spenser's language is unsatisfying on a number of fronts. Consider archaism: contemporary research is largely agreed that *The Faerie Queene* seems more archaic than it is in fact: because Spenser claimed to be using (in E. K.'s phrase) 'olde and obsolete words', literary history has taken him more at his own word than on the lexical evidence of his poetry.² Joyce's less nuanced reading – that

The Faerie Queene is a linguistic ‘freak’ – leads to some curios of diction (vii). Thus ‘For Titan (as ye all acknowledg must)/Was Saturn’s elder brother by Birth-right’ becomes ‘*There’s none of you can argue but/that Titan was Saturn’s only sib*’ (18-19; VII.vi.27). Though the sibilance of the second line is a nice touch, Joyce’s idiom is more distanced here from modern English than Spenser’s. Indeed, that mixed idiom raises the ontological question of what sort of a text *Fastness* is. Joyce defends his subtitle, ‘A Translation from the English of Edmund Spenser’ politically: as the Cantos mask the suppression of Irish history, so Joyce ‘translates’ Spenser from his ideologically English perspective, as he has done previously with his version of *Ruines of Rome* in *Rome’s Wreck* (2014). Yet the subtitle elides what *Fastness* ‘translates’ the Cantos *into*. Joyce effectively constructs an argot of his own, which mimics, mocks and goes by Spenser, but one critical question must be whether that language gives a meaningful poetic equivalent to that of the original. In this example, it’s difficult to see how Joyce’s text makes a better case for Mutability: performatively and rhetorically ‘*There’s none of you can argue but*’ is simply a weaker articulation of Spenser’s original line; it still plays the court-room game of the original, but without its punch and cadence. The terms of the debate are not significantly changed, it’s simply the literary presentation which is modified. One of my queries in reading *Fastness* was why this modification did not go further. If the devices of rhyme and iambic pentameter are outmoded and contaminated, why not abandon stanza altogether and dislocate Spenser into a more radical free verse?

Similarly, the claim that Spenser unproblematically sides with Jove is premature, as is Joyce’s restriction of the poem’s allegorical meaning to the Elizabethan plantation of Munster. Of course, the Cantos meditate deviously on political and ideological change against a prominent backdrop in which Edmund Spenser worked as colonial administrator, landowner, and in the *View*, ideological defender of plantation. But to flatten them only to these terms – to cast, say, Mutability as Hugh O’Neill and Diana as Elizabeth I – is a step the original never unequivocally takes (xiii). Thus the broader questions raised by the Cantos – the philosophical understanding of change and the ways in which poetry may engage with the Ovidian tradition – are largely erased by Joyce. The distance between Spenser’s ‘O piteous Work of MUTABILITIE’ and Joyce’s ‘Nice work there, Mutability’ is a huge chasm in feeling and sensibility: what for Spenser is an existential question which unsettles every fibre of his poetic and political credo is for Joyce a casual shrug of the shoulders (4-5; VII.vi.6). Sure, Joyce resists the snare of literariness, but at what cost in terms of ‘the carefully distributed threads of Spenser’s utterance’?

Stylistically, Joyce’s primary concern was ‘to aim for speed, and idiomatic clarity as against Spenser’s artificially distanced register’; the flowers of conventional poeticism are therefore to be rigorously pruned (xvi-xvii). Joyce’s sickle-wielding is most evident in the pageant of the seasons and the months, which whittles Spenserian stanzas into six liners:

Autumn came next
 costumed in yellow
 radiating fulness and good
 fellowship, a sickle
 in his hand, to reap
 the ripe yield of the earth (59)

Certainly, a lot of Spenserian ‘beautiful language’ is lost here, some of which ‘may seem tedious, confused, and hopelessly obscure’ to modern readers (xi). Yet it’s surprising that in context – the seasons are after all planks in Mutability’s case against Jove – that Joyce omits Spenser’s evocation of hunger. In the light of the horrific passage in the *View* recommending starvation as a policy to subject the Irish, the image of Hunger ‘which to-fore/Him by the Belly had oft pinched sore’ is, to say the least, provocative (58).³ The seasons may show Spenser at his most self-indulgently rhetorical, but (in this example) such detail is seldom literary for its own sake: hunger and starvation are lived realities to the poet of the Cantos. Similarly, Joyce’s June – ‘sprawled on a Crab/that shifted back and forwards/like an awkward guest’ seems a missed opportunity in its elision of the social realism of the second half of the original stanza:

With crooked crawling Steps an uncouth Pace,
And backward yode, as Bargemen wont to fare
Bending their Force contrary to their Face,
Like that ungracious Crew which feigns demurest Grace. (62-63; VII.vii.35)⁴

My suspicion would be that a passage like this is omitted partly for issues of condensation, but also because it doesn’t fit Joyce’s reading of Spenser. A vivid image of Thames boatmen plying their trade (with a canny, mercantile pun on ‘fare’) is juxtaposed with a satire of cringing, hypocritical courtiers; unusually for Spenser, the working man is valued more highly than his educated yet ‘ungracious’ counterparts.⁵ Joyce may not be interested in the London Spenser, but this stanza suggests that he remains a residually important presence in the Cantos.

One of the intriguing aspects of *Fastness* is the way in which its ostensible aim of paring Spenser back reveals the latter’s economy of means. In Mutability’s first showdown with Jove, Spenser stages a tense tangle between the antagonists on the verb *Cease*: ‘Then cease thy idle Claim thou foolish Girl... Cease *Saturn*’s son, to seek by proffers vain’ (VII.vii.34). The word incarnates the impasse between Titanness and Olympian, and arguably shows the former worsting the latter poetically and argumentatively, since this stanza leads to the trial in the next canto. Joyce gilds Spenser’s lily: the first line becomes ‘*So quit, you foolish girl, cease/and desist to waste court time*’, while the second passage introduces two new verbs: ‘*Don’t try, you Saturn’s son, to wheedle/me with empty breath*’ (24-25). For Spenser’s single verb, Joyce offers four synonyms alongside the original term, so that demotic utterance is surprisingly at odds with poetic force and concision; Joyce also loses the characteristically Spenserian euphony whereby ‘Cease’ shades to ‘seek’ in underlining Mutability’s rebuke. She repeats Jove because she senses the weakness of his argument and the uncertainty of his position. Joyce adds to Jove’s bluster, but he fails to register Mutability’s authority.

Finally, consider Joyce’s version of the penultimate stanza, where Spenser’s narrator laments evanescence in the most devastating turn of a feminine rhyme: ‘Whose flowring Pride, so fading and so fickle,/Short *Time* shall soon cut down with his consuming Sickle’ (80, VII.viii.1). Joyce admits his discomfort with these stanzas: the narrator purveys what he calls ‘the surface dazzle of mystery’, spoken apparently by ‘a completely new voice’ which shows ‘the poet’s putting his own faith... in the religiously motivated force of Elizabeth’s Protestant armies’ (xvii, xiii). Joyce’s

intention here is then deeply ironic; the sickle must be stowed away and the force of the lament blunted:

I'm sick to death of seeing
this dodgy state of things, and alienated too
from all attachments in this so unperfect world,
those sky-flowers falling furiously. (81)

Again, what we have is a stark disparity between Spenserian rhetoric and a modern version which flaunts its indifference to these things. Joyce's narrator seems at first like a grumbling commuter ('sick to death') and then like a cod mystic, seeing 'sky-flowers' because of his alienation from this 'so unperfect world'. The pun on 'unperfect' – taking the word from Matthew Lownes's 1609 Folio where it describes the textual condition of Canto VIII and repurposing it for the new poem – is neat and in its own way not unSpenserian. Yet there is a significant difficulty in assessing this: if you buy Joyce's reading of the Cantos, this can seem a reasonable rejection of Spenserian flummery. If the narrator *is* a delusional mystic (and imperial apologist), the ironic strategy is a legitimate means of destabilizing his dubious textual authority. But if like me you don't follow this interpretation, your reaction is likely to be less sympathetic. Poetically, *Fastness* replaces lines of the most intense and troubled concentration (contra Joyce, one is reminded of the narrator's longer exordium at the start of the Canto VI) with an idiomatic yet shapeless verse – what might be called contemporary drab style – which seems perversely to misconstrue what the original stanza is saying.

Fastness nevertheless remains a provocative poem which made me think anew about the many poetic idioms of *The Faerie Queene*. As I hope the examples I have given indicate, Joyce's version has the effect of making you reread the Cantos in the light of an almost wholly different poetic praxis, largely antipathetic to Spenserian styles and registers. For me, this experience reinforces my sense that though much of *The Faerie Queene* may be formulaic, often it is not, and often – when Spenser is at his most literary, he is also at his most pointed. Joyce's excisions and deviations from The Mutabilitie Cantos therefore tell us much about the differences between contemporary and Elizabethan poetry, but they also underline the ways in which Spenser wrote imagistically and directly about the world in which he lived.

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¹ This is not an exhaustive list: Heaney, *Beowulf* (Faber, 1999), Robert Henryson, *The Testament of Cresseid and Seven Fables* (Faber, 2009); Armitage, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Faber, 2007); *The Death of King Arthur* (Faber, 2012); *Pearl* (Faber, 2016); Greenlaw, *A Double Sorrow* (Faber, 2014); Oswald, *Memorial* (Faber, 2011).

² E. K., Epistle to Harvey, in *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William Oram et al, p.14. For archaism, see e.g. and Andrew Zurcher, *Spenser's Legal Language: Law and Poetry in Early Modern England* (D. S. Brewer, 2007), pp.7-8, 30-32; Lucy Munro, *Archaic Style in English Literature 1590-1674* (Cambridge UP, 2013), pp.78-86, 207-16, and <http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/spenseronline/review/volume-44/442/reviews/munro-lucy-archaic-style-in-english-literature-1590-1674/>,

³ Spenser, *The Prose Works*, ed. Rudolf Gottfried (Johns Hopkins UP, 1949), pp.154, 158-59.

⁴ Another presentational curio is the decision to reprint Spenser's text from Hughes's 1715 edition rather than the 1609 Lownes text given in most modern editions (see pp.83-84). Fortuitously, Hughes's text does some modernizing and normalizing of Spenser's poem which pulls against the claim that it is freakishly unusual.

⁵ I follow S. P. Zitner's gloss of this passage in Spenser, *The Mutabilitie Cantos*, ed. Zitner (Thomas Nelson, 1968), p.140.