



Review of
Simon Armitage,
Pearl: A New Verse
Translation

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SARE: Southeast Asian Review of English, Vol. 55, Issue 1, 2018

Simon Armitage. *Pearl: A New Verse Translation*. New York: Liveright, 2016. 153 pp. ISBN: 978--1-63149-254-9.

On the face of it, I cannot think of a less appropriate person to translate *Pearl*. Simon Armitage's poetry is known for its dry, uncompromisingly colloquial language, perhaps the complete opposite of the courtly, high-flown style of *Pearl*, a product of the so-called "alliterative revival" of fourteenth-century England. *Pearl* presents us with a discourse on a number of subjects: bereavement, the afterlife, sin, grace, repentance, and salvation – the kind of material that falls way under the radar of the gritty accounts of contemporary and resolutely secular British life that fill the pages of Armitage's own volumes of published poetry (not to mention his prose works). The discourse in *Pearl* is framed by a dream vision, a form that was popular in the fourteenth century as a vehicle for religious and social allegory, all stuff that has little currency in contemporary Britain, or Southeast Asia for that matter. In his vision, the speaker describes in vivid detail a crystalline garden where he finds his deceased daughter on the other side of a river. The girl is metaphorically represented as a precious pearl whom the speaker loses in a garden. In the text, it is the daughter who, in a series of mini homilies, expounds on the subjects alluded to earlier.

So the text itself, I would submit, presents the modern day translator with a significant challenge: how does he or she make all this relevant, interesting, inspiring, let alone just readable, to a contemporary reader? Armitage already has under his belt translations of Homer's *Odyssey*, the late medieval alliterative *Morte Arthure*, and quite promisingly, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a courtly romance that has come down to us in the same unique fourteenth-century manuscript, written in the same hand, and by scholarly consensus, also written by the same anonymous poet who wrote *Pearl*. Even more encouraging is the fact that the alliterative line in *Pearl* is to all intents and purposes the same tight, four-beat line employed to carry the weight of the narrative in *Sir Gawain*. So one might well ask what could possibly go wrong with this translation of *Pearl*; shouldn't it take its rightful place as a worthy companion to Armitage's acclaimed, award-winning, and in my opinion, successful translation of *Sir Gawain* (2007)?

Well quite a number of things.

Armitage tries to give contemporary readers a flavour of the original verse form with a looser equivalent. He rightly eschews rhyme, and does not slavishly follow the alliterative patterns of the original. Here and there, he uses assonance in place of alliteration: "before him who labored all day long" (Line 598); or a mixture of assonance and alliteration: "and the four obedient beasts at His feet" (Line 886). Armitage's modern English lines come across not only as looser but are often stretched to the point where you feel that "prose" might be a more appropriate label for what you are reading:

No sun or moon ever shone so sweetly
as the plentiful water that poured through those precincts. (Lines 1057-58)

Compare this with the original:

Sunne ne mone schon never so swete
As that foyssoun flode out of that flet.¹

The phrase “that poured through” in the translation is entirely unnecessary and in fact absent in the original. No doubt it couples “water” with an appropriate verb, since liquids do not “shine” in quite the same way as “sun” and “moon”. But are we not dealing with poetry here rather than prose? Does everything have to be spelled out with blunt logic? Having established “p” as an alliterating consonant in “plentiful” and “poured” it only remains for the translator to foist the awkward “precincts” on the line. In fact, that line could have been translated literally word for word, and quite intelligibly, thus: “As that fulsome flood out of that floor.”

Often, it is the use of polysyllables of Latinate and French origin that contribute to stretching out the line and muddying the underlying four-beat rhythm:

In a clear voice, a verse of the Psalter
Is proof of an incontrovertible point. (Lines 593-4)

The original has this:

In Sauter is sayd a verce overte
That spekez a poynt determynable.

The French loanword “determinable” in the original sits comfortably in the line and it is even possible to read it as an octosyllabic with alternating stresses. The six syllables of “incontrovertible” defy any attempt at reading that line in any rhythmic fashion.

Or take the following lines:

The man who attempted to imagine its magnitude
would find himself flummoxed, his mind befuddled. (Lines 223-224)

Which renders the original:

A mannez dom moght dryghtly demme
Er mynd moght malte in hit mesure;

Tolkien’s rendering of the same lines gives us an idea how much superfluity there is in Armitage’s translation:

Ere mind could fathom its worth and might

Man's reason thwarted would despair.

The use of the colloquial “flummoxed” in Armitage’s translation is entirely out of character. The language of the poems in the *Pearl* manuscript points to a West Midlands/Northwestern provenance. It might have been “dialectal” from the point of view of Chaucer’s London English that was to serve as the basis for a sole literary standard, but it is anything but colloquial. This I think is a case of the poet allowing his own personal poetic voice, which is often conversational and strongly colloquial, to intrude into his translation and frequently rubbish the tone of the original.

Examples of annoying clichés and trite phraseology are to be found everywhere in the text. In a line describing the apparel of the daughter, Armitage has: “And if memory serves, her flowing sleeves” (Line 201). The phrase “I wot & I wene” of the original literally means: “I know and I think”, and doesn’t carry any significant meaning at all in the text and is there really just to fill out the line with a pair of alliterating words to balance the “lapez large” (broad sleeves) in the first half of the line. Tolkien chose not to translate it at all and has: “Her sleeves hung long below her waist”. “And if memory serves” might be conversational and engaging, but in this context it comes across as rather unconvincing when you consider the fact that the speaker recalls all the details of the gem-encrusted garden of his vision in vivid concrete detail. He has no problem with his memory because this compelling vision has been etched firmly in his mind’s eye.

One particularly annoying feature of the translation is the resort to paraphrasing or use of less effective words where very good cognates exist in Modern English. One of the more egregious examples of this is the rendering of the phrase “by stok other ston” as “by tree and stone” (Line 380). Another example is the translation of the following lines:

Fowlez þer flowen in fryth in frere,
Of flaumbande huez, bothe smale & grete. (Lines 89-90)

In rendering these lines, Armitage seems to have allowed the exigencies of a self-imposed alliterative pattern to force a substitution of the “flaming” of the original text for another word:

All shape and size of shimmering fowl
Flocked and flew as one through the wood;

I am not sure that the substitution of “shape and size” is any improvement on the “smale & grete” of the original. Why fix something that is already doing a good job of conveying meaning? Tolkien retains both the fiery attribution to the colours of the birds as well as the two adjectives in the original describing the size of the birds. In the word “pair”, Tolkien has also given us a more exact translation of “frere”, which means “companion” here:

In the woods the birds did wing and pair
Of flaming hues, both great and small

If Tolkien's translation leans heavily towards the literal, Armitage's translation may be seen as chipping away at the literal text here and there in an attempt to give equivalents in Modern English. His attempt at crafting an equivalent, rather than a literal, translation does not quite go as far as that of fellow British poet, Jane Draycott, who in her 2011 translation of *Pearl* renders these same lines thus:

In the forest, birds with feathers the colour
of flame flew together –

Draycott leaves out the “great and small” bit altogether, arguably, a detail which adds little to the meaning. I think she has given us a translation that captures far better the spirit of the original text.

Just compare Draycott's account of the last four lines of the first stanza of the poem:

So pity me the day I lost her
in this garden where she fell
beneath the grass into the earth.
I stand bereft, struck to the heart
with love and loss. My spotless pearl.

With Armitage's:

But I lost my pearl in a garden of herbs;
she slipped from me through grass to ground,
and I mourn now, with a broken heart,
for that priceless pearl without a spot.

Armitage's translation exactly mirrors the four lines of the original and is fairly literal, whilst Draycott gives herself a generous five lines – having saved a line from her translation of the first eight lines of the stanza – to express the speaker's sense of loss and grief at losing his spotless pearl. The one word that Armitage does not translate is the “allas!” of the original. How does one translate this anyway, without sounding antique and, horror of horrors, poetic? Draycott very expertly gets around this with an engaging and urgent direct address to the reader: “so pity me.”

And this is where I think Armitage's *Pearl* has failed to live up to the promise of his translation of *Sir Gawain*. He tries too hard to give us the letter of the text, but lacks the scholarship and experience of a Tolkien to do this convincingly. I sense that he has failed to let the text get under his skin the way *Sir Gawain* has. Perhaps it is the genre of *Pearl* that is to be blamed for this unsatisfactory translation. The strong, lively narrative thrust of *Sir Gawain* seems to have inspired Armitage to give us a fine translation that is largely free from the issues discussed above. Even the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, a text far inferior to either *Pearl* or *Sir Gawain*, seems to have given him enough inspiration for a good translation. Armitage might have given contemporary readers an accessible, even for some, engaging, translation of a difficult text; a window into a world that might otherwise be incomprehensible to many today. The message of loss, of grace, and of salvation

is still there in the translation. The urgent voice of the speaker, and particularly the sternly splendid figure of the girl, translated, if you will forgive the pun, into the hereafter, still come across fairly intact in Armitage's translation. However, the intensity of expression of the original has generally been significantly compromised, and in many places obliterated altogether, leaving the verse form of the translation a poor shadow of the original. This act of dumbing down has left us with a pearl that has lost much of its original lustre.

NOTE

¹ All quotations from the original Middle English text are taken from the American edition, which prints the original as facing page parallel text. This is absent from the British edition (Faber).

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