ROBERT KAPLAN


Antonio Benitez-Rojo, a Cuban novelist, essayist and short-story writer, was born in Havana in 1931. While in Cuba Benitez-Rojo won several awards for his fiction, including the 1967 Premio Casa de las Américas for the short story collection Tute de Reyes. After a successful career in Cuba, he left the island in 1980 and moved to the United States, where he eventually became Professor of Spanish at Amherst College. He died in Northampton, Massachusetts in 2005.

Woman in Battle Dress is the semi-fictionalized story of Henriette Faber, a woman who in 1809, at the age of 18, enrolled herself in medical school in Paris. Since medicine was a profession prohibited to women, she changed her name to Henri in order to matriculate, and would spend the next fifteen years practicing medicine and living as a man. The story starts near the end of Henriette’s (known) life, and is a long recollection—in the first person—of her life and adventures.

Especially for a long novel such as this, Benitez-Rojo has done an admirable job creating and maintaining Henriette’s voice. She is a product of both Europe and the Caribbean, and also a combination of a romantic young woman of the time and the tough French army surgeon Henri who has to endure Napoleon’s brutal defeat and retreat from Russia.

In a 2003 interview with Andrea Schwieger, Benitez-Rojo had this to say about his stylistic approach to Woman In Battle Dress:

There is a love story, a war story, an episode of a theatre troupe traveling from one city to another, and then again the political implications of Enriqueta’s studies. There is a variety of novelistic models, though I always use the same language. So you won’t see a rupture in it. I love to do research and I want to make the reader believe that the novel deals with a particular time and space, although I know that it remains a fictional text.

Segments of the novel flow seamlessly from romance to history to picaresque to almost magical realism, and back again. And while
the novel takes place mostly in Europe and the United States, the Caribbean accent is always present. In some ways you could be reading a novel written two hundred years ago. The romanticism, the dense unhurried prose, are all there, and Jessica Powell’s translation beautifully captures the style and voice of the original. Precisely because it is so unobtrusive, this translation is so worthy of praise. Some samples:

(pp 198, pp 196 in English)
Más de una vez me he preguntado que razón me mueve a escribir. Si de algo estoy segura es que no persigo con ello ningún propósito edificante, cívico o educativo. Una Moll Flanders no soy. Tampoco escribo para mejorar mi posición o por defender alguna causa; mucho menos por vanidad, ese defecto tan común entre la gente de letras.

So why then write this story, she asks? Some reasons...

el placer de sacar del olvido los rostros de aquellos que amé, de rescatar la magia de ciertos momentos, de revisitase mis asombros, mis dudas, mis ambiciones, mis errores y aciertos; el placer de barajar mi vida y echarla sobre la mesa como las cartas de un solitario, el dos de espadas sobre el as, el cuatro de bastos sobre el tres, la expectación de colocar el último rey sobre la última reina…

And even achieving some fleeting immortality. Addressing the future reader, she says:

Gracias a ti, quienquiera que seas, las aventuras y emociones que tienes a la vista brillarán durante las horas que demores en leerlas. Por un momento, hombre o mujer de otro siglo, tendrás la ilusión de mirarme a los ojos y de sentir mi corazón latir próximo al tuyo. ¿Jugar a existir de nuevo? Por qué no. ¿Acaso el más tenue de los fantasmas no representa una victoria sobre la muerte?”

Jessica Powell’s masterful translation:
More than once I have asked myself what it is that compels me to write. If there’s one thing I’m sure of, it’s that I do not pursue any edifying, civic or educational agenda. Moll Flanders I am not. Nor do I write to improve my social position or to defend a cause; much less out of vanity, that defect so common among writers.

for the pleasure of pulling from oblivion the faces of those I loved, of reviving the magic of certain moments, of revisiting my fears, my doubts, my ambitions, my mistakes and my successes; for the pleasure of shuffling the cards of my life and laying them out on the table as in a game of solitaire, the two of spades over the ace, the four of clubs over the three, the anticipation of placing the last king over the final queen…

Thanks to you, whoever you may be, the adventures and emotions laid out in front of you will shine during the hours you spend reading about them. For one moment, man or woman of another century, you will experience the illusion of looking me in the eye and of feeling my heart beat against your own. Do I play at living again? Why not? Doesn’t even the most tenuous of ghosts represent a victory over death?

There are small pearls throughout the English version (for example the above “mis asombros” as “my fears,” truer to the original than a more literal translation).

*Woman in Battle Dress* has a lovely unhurried tone that draws you effortlessly into the story, and Ms. Powell’s translation is of the highest quality.