

A TRADITION OF ERROR: ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF *DON QUIJOTE*, II, 24

Following Don Quijote's account of the wondrous things he saw in the Cave of Montesinos there is a pause in the narrative, and we are addressed directly by the "first author" Cide Hamete Benengeli. Hamete confesses his perplexity as to the truth of what the Knight has just recounted, and urges us, prudent readers that we are, to form our own judgement. Rhetorically we expect the matter to stop there; the paragraph ends, however, with a subsequent statement: "puesto que se tiene por cierto que al tiempo de su fin y muerte dicen que se retrató della, y dijo que él la había inventado, por parecerle que convenía y cuadraba bien con las aventuras que había leído en sus historias."¹ This final statement subverts all that precedes it; it has also defied translation into English. I wish to suggest here how these are related.

Readers of *Don Quijote* in English translation presumably regard the novel's protagonist as a self-confessed liar. From the Seventeenth Century onward, we learn that he "confessed on his deathbed to having invented" the scenes in the cave. John J. Allen, in his survey of the English translations, calls our attention to this passage, the introductory paragraphs of Part II, Chapter 24, as an example of translators' attempts to "make sense" of Cervantes' text.² The tradition begins in 1620 with Shelton: "though one thing be certain: that when he was on his deathbed he disdained this adventure, and said that he had only invented it..." In one way or another the text is betrayed by all subsequent versions, including the three of our own century; thus, Putnam (1949): "It is definitely reported, however, that at the time of his death he retracted what he had said," etc.; and Cohen (1950) and Starkie (1964): "One thing, however, is certain, that finally he retracted it on his death-bed and confessed that he had invented it," etc. Only Ormsby (1885), Allen believes, comes close: "though certain it is they say that at the time of his death he retracted," etc. "A step closer" is perhaps a better judgement. One notes with some astonishment that the accuracy of each translation does not necessarily improve on its predecessors.³

¹ This and all other quotations from the original Spanish are taken from the Martín de Riquer edition, 2 vols. (Barcelona: Editorial Juventud, 1944), II, 713.

² "Traduttori Traditori: Don Quixote in English," *Crítica Hispánica*, I, No. 1 (1979), 6-7.

³ This is especially so with Cohen and Starkie, but also true of the new Norton critical edition as

The temptation to "make sense" of Cervantes' prose is but one of a variety of problems Allen has found in the English translations. These range from the amusing mistake to complexities of maintaining separate levels of diction. The problem of *Don Quijote*, II, 24 is interesting because of its persistence. The English mistakes, centered on "se tiene por cierto" and "dicen," invite us to reread the entire passage.

Chapter 24 begins by interrupting Cide Hamete's narrative. An unidentified voice quotes the Morisco translator of the "original" as saying he found the following paragraph written in Hamete's hand in the margin. As is so often the case, Cervantes turns the tables; a narrative is suspended and the narrator suddenly becomes the subject of a short narrative himself. Cide Hamete's note conveys a paradox in supposedly proper rhetorical style. To rehearse the propositions:

1. Hamete cannot believe the account in the previous chapter because
 - A. All adventures until now have been plausible.
 - B. This one is not.
2. On the other hand, Don Quijote would not tell a lie.

The reader's experience through the first two items is that of following the development of the propositions of a paradox. Two things that cannot be simultaneously true nonetheless are apparently so. We advance to a third proposition:

3. Furthermore Don Quijote lacked sufficient time while in the Cave to fabricate such a "máquina" of absurdities.

This seemingly innocent addition confounds the paradox: it does not bolster either term of the antithesis, but it does complicate the sense of each. If taken in reference to the first proposition, it negates it. If in reference to the second, it makes Don Quijote's veracity not a moral truth but a matter of insufficient time; i.e., it effectively negates this proposition also.

The fourth statement appears where we would expect a resolution of the paradox, a conclusion, but it is of course no such thing:

4. If the adventure seems apocryphal, it is not Hamete's fault, for he merely passes it on to us without attesting to its verity.

We are commanded to judge "lo que te pareciere," our "first historian" having abdicated his responsibilities at this point.⁴ (We recall the promise

well. Editions quoted: Thomas Shelton (1612, 1620; rpt. London: The Navarre Society, 1923); Samuel Putnam (New York: Modern Library-Random House, 1949); J.M. Cohen (Harmonsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1950); Walter Starkie (New York: New American Library, 1964); John Ormsby (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1885); Joseph R. Jones and Kenneth Douglas, eds. *Don Quixote. The Ormsby Translation, Revised* (New York: Norton, 1981).

⁴ "First" author, "second," "original," "translator," as well as "apocryphal" and "spurious" accounts can produce "ontological vertigo," in a phrase of Robert B. Alter's fine essay "The Mirror of Knights and the World of Mirrors," Chap. 1 of his *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 1-29.

made in the novel's opening paragraph: "basta que en la narración dél no se salga un punto de la verdad.") But before we can fulfill the charge to judge for ourselves, Hamete adds the sentence which we have seen continuously mistranslated into English.

The words "se tiene por cierto" and "dicen" refer to public opinion; both terms act as qualifiers for the assertion ostensibly being made that Don Quijote lied. The first voice seems authoritative until we come to "dicen" and realize that we are in a verbal hall of mirrors, for what is being said *in effect* is: "They say it is certain... that they say."⁵ It is useful at this point to look at the most recent English edition, the Jones and Douglas revision of Ormsby: "Some maintain, however, that at the time of his death he retracted and said he had invented it all..." By rearranging Ormsby's original, Jones and Douglas may have increased the strength of the hearsay reference in the text, but the telescoping of the two facing terms into one ("Some maintain") betrays Cervantes' narrative structure just as did Ormsby. This newest addition simply confirms the tradition, "keeping the record perfect!"

Did Don Quijote lie? Some English translation readers don't have any doubt; thus Mark Van Doren's opinion, for example, that "Don Quixote conceives a hoax of his own..."⁶ Van Doren had read Motteux's translation (revised by Ozell) which he felt "...is itself a work of comic genius, always joyful and often very beautiful, and this in my view makes up for any demerit it may have. I follow Prescott, Ticknor, and Lockhart in believing that it is remarkably faithful to the genius of Cervantes." (p. viii) Here is the source of Van Doren's error: "Though I must acquaint him [the reader] by the way; that Don Quixote, upon his death-bed, utterly disowned this adventure, as a perfect fable, which he said, he had invented purely to please his humour..."⁷ Those who do not imbibe at such a dubious source as the English translations see the matter in different, larger perspective. E.C. Riley's view is typical: "It is useless to ask if what Quixote related was a dream, a wilful fabrication, or anything else. Cervantes never intended us to know."⁸ Allen believes that Cervantes dissolves the problem in "third-hand hearsay evidence." (p. 7) Obviously neither Riley nor Allen has been misled by an English translation!

The responses of two Hispanic readers confirm, I think, the view of Riley and others. Galdós, increasingly an improved reader of the *Quijote*,

⁵ Alter, pp. 6-12, describes the hallucinatory effects of the illustration of the Knight and the Biscayan in Part I, Chap. 9: "The whole passage, of course, is a representation within a representation of what one finally hesitates to call reality—a picture within a book within a narration by the 'second author of this work.' Its effect is like that of a mirror within a painting reflecting the subject of the painting..." I am suggesting that by setting the two "dicen" face to face Cervantes has created a similar mirroring in II, 24—one that has confounded English translators.

⁶ *Don Quixote's Profession* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 55.

⁷ *Don Quixote: Ozell's Revision of the Translation of Peter Motteux* (New York: Modern Library, 1930), p. 598.

⁸ *Cervantes's Theory of the Novel* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 187.

seems to have caught the spirit of Cervantes' intent in a description of Jacinta's perplexity. Her husband Juanito Santa Cruz has just explained away once more his extramarital affairs: "¿Creía Jacinta aquellas cosas, o aparentaba creerlas como Sancho las bolas que Don Quijote le contó de la Cueva de Montesinos?" (*Fortunata y Jacinta*, III, 2, iii) The use of indirect narrative style enables Galdós to shift responsibility for judgement away from the narrator and towards the character, without fixing it on one or the other. The resulting ambiguity nicely imitates Chapter 24's tone. In our own century, it is perhaps Borges who is most finely attuned to Cervantes here. The master short story writer repeatedly pays homage to the master novelist; thus the opening sentence of "Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos": "Cuentan los hombres dignos de fe (pero Alá sabe más), que..." Borges' most intense response, however, is undoubtedly the opening paragraph of "La intrusa" with its deliberate invocation of Chapter 24:

Dicen (lo cual es improbable) que la historia fue referida por Eduardo, el menor de los Nelson, en el velorio de Cristián, el mayor, que falleció de muerte natural, hacia mil ochocientos noventa y tantos, en el partido de Morón. Lo cierto es que alguien la oyó de alguien, en el decurso de esa larga noche perdida, entre mate y mate, y la repitió a Santiago Dabove, por quien la supe. Años después, volvieron a contármela en Turdera, donde había acontecido. La segunda versión, algo más prolija, confirmaba en suma la de Santiago, con las pequeñas variaciones y divergencias que son del caso. La escribo ahora porque en ella se cifra, si no me engaño, un breve y trágico cristal de la índole de los orilleros antiguos. Lo haré con probidad, pero ya preveo que cederé a la tentación literaria de acentuar o agregar algún pormenor.

What is it about "dicen" that has produced such a singular tradition of betrayal in English? The word has certain resonances that "they say" may lack; it is a cultural concept, while the English is closer to mere description. "Dicen" is highly charged; "they say" much less so. Traditionally, the Spanish moral code was enforced by the opinion of one's *vecinos* in the village. To have "vergüenza" is to have respect for what others think and say of you.⁹ Indeed, the public expression of this opinion is nominalized in Spanish—"el qué dirán"—and may be found, for example, as an explanation for moral choice in countless early folksongs. One's moral status rests on the tongues of neighbors. "Dicen," as a manifestation of the traditional enforcement of the Hispanic code of values, has more than the hearsay stature of "they say."

There is another dimension to "dicen" not readily associated with "they say." Cervantes lived in an age of religious conflict in a country which had appointed itself defender of the Catholic faith. Spain fought wars abroad against both Protestant and Islamic heresy, with increasing lack of success. At home the war against the heterodox was institutionalized in the Inquisition, whose workings conditioned the patterns of being for Spaniards in

⁹ See J.A. Pitt-Rivers, *The People of the Sierra* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

ways unlike those of other Europeans. As Stephen Gilman has so well described for us in his book *The Spain of Fernando de Rojas*, some Spaniards experienced a malevolent atmosphere in which informers were always eager to denounce a neighbor for one form of heresy or another. In this climate a new Christian, however sincere his religious belief, would understand this extra dimension to "dicen." Cervantes' irony seems aimed at more than "Tridentine dogmatism."¹⁰ Informers and witch hunts are not the exclusive patrimony of Spanish history, but the institutional character of the phenomenon imprints itself semantically on "dicen" and other words. This second dimension to "dicen" is underscored by Cervantes' use of a term from the lexicon of the Inquisition proceedings—"se retrató."

More than "they say" is implied by "dicen." Don Quijote has been declared a liar by almost all his English translators, and all have consistently "made sense" of Cervantes' deliberate irony. Cide Hamete speaks of the "tan gran máquina de disparates" he cannot persuade himself to believe. But the real "máquina" here is Cervantes' creation of Benengeli, the "translator," and this remarkable introduction to Chapter 24. The concern our Knight expressed over the "first historian's" work would have been better spent on that of the English translators!

Cervantes has created a dialogue of multiple voices with attendant discord and conflicting views. The narration is thus a reflection of what has been called the "quixotic word (la verbe donquichotesque), which is invocation and critique, conjuration and radical probing, both one and the other with their risks and perils."¹¹ Beyond the individual word, the narrative is structured to allow what seems an endless parade of voices to speak to us. The persistent error of English translators has been to remove one or more of these voices.

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¹⁰ A suggestion put forth by Bruce W. Wardropper in his useful essay "Don Quixote: Story or History?" *Modern Philology*, LXIII, No. 1, (Aug., 1965), p. 11.

¹¹ Marthe Robert, *The Old and the New: From Don Quixote to Kafka* trans. Carol Cosman (1963; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 21, n. 4.