

"LAS AVENTURAS DE PICKWICK": NOTES ON BENITO PEREZ GALDOS AS TRANSLATOR OF DICKENS

Ningún problema tan consustancial con las letras y con su modesto misterio como el que propone una traducción.

Jorge Luis Borges, "Las versiones Homéricas," *Discusión*, 1957

The importance of Dickens' writing on Benito Pérez Galdós' early years in Madrid is a subject that has invited serious research for some time. J.E. Varey, among others, has noted how very little has been done in this important area, and how much yet remains to be done.¹ Galdós was an obscure journalist in his early twenties when introduced to the English master's works by his Catalonian friend and fellow writer Federico Balart, whom he met "un par de años... antes del 68."² Dickens died in 1870, just two years after Galdós launched his novelistic career with the publication of *La Fontana de Oro*. Although the two did not ever meet, so great was Galdós' esteem for the author of *Pickwick Papers* that when he travelled to England he visited Dickens' "sepultura reciente" in Westminster Abbey almost as if it were a religious shrine, and he, a pilgrim. He called Dickens "mi maestro más amado," "un santo de mi devoción más viva," whose works he claimed to devour "con loco afán."³ In Dickens Galdós found a contemporary writer worthy of emulation not only for his originality and sheer genius, but also because Galdós saw in him a worthy successor to the Cervantine-picaresque tradition which had dissipated after flourishing in Spain and now had found roots in British soil.⁴ Galdós translated *The*

¹ J.E. Varey, "Galdós in the Light of Recent Criticism," *Galdós Studies*, ed. J.E. Varey (London: Tamesis Books, Ltd., 1970), p. 14.

² Benito Pérez Galdós, *Las cartas desconocidas de Galdós en 'La Prensa' de Buenos Aires*, ed. William H. Shoemaker (Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, 1973), pp. 520-21.

³ Benito Pérez Galdós, *Memorias de un desmemoriado*, in *Obras completas [Novelas y miscelánea]*, introducciones de Federico Carlos Sáinz de Robles (Madrid: Aguilar, 1971), p. 1468.

⁴ Galdós notes, "Su plan es el mismo de Gil Blas de Santillana y de casi todas las novelas españolas del siglo XVII..." Benito Pérez Galdós, *Los artículos de Galdós en 'La Nación' 1865-1866, 1868*, ed. William H. Shoemaker (Madrid: Insula, 1972), p. 453. Also see Benito Pérez Galdós, *Ensayos de crítica literaria*, introducción de Laureano Bonet (Barcelona: Ediciones Península, 1972), pp. 214-215.

Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club (1837) as *Las aventuras de Pickwick* for the pages of *La Nación* between March 9th and July 7th, 1868; it was the first translation of that novel into Spanish. Since Galdós' translation of *Pickwick Papers* is seldom discussed, the present study will be devoted to the virtually unexplored territory of Galdós as translator rather than the later Galdós, author of *Fortunata y Jacinta* and other master works.⁵ It is hoped that such a study of Galdós will bring further insight to studies of Galdós the mature artist.

There are few things simple and settled in the study of either Galdós' life or his works, and ascertaining the degree of Galdós' familiarity with Dickens is neither a simple nor a settled matter. Berkowitz has listed some twenty volumes of Dickens' works in Galdós' personal library in French, English, and Spanish.⁶ Among those books are a two-volume edition of *Pickwick* in English (published in Philadelphia, 1847), and one remaining volume (the first) of a two-volume set of the French translation of the work, published in Paris in 1865. In his essay "Carlos Dickens," which appeared in *La Nación* the same day as the first installment of *Pickwick Papers* and served as an introduction, Galdós speaks familiarly of *David Copperfield*, *Hard Times* (*Los malos tiempos*), *Olivier* [*sic*] *Twist*, and *Nicolás Nickleby*, in addition to *Pickwick*; he notes that Dickens' novels belong to "el mayor grado de perfección a que ha llegado la novela en nuestro siglo."⁷ But in spite of Galdós' familiar reference to these works by Dickens, it is not certain that he did read the works themselves in their entirety, although some of the volumes by Dickens still preserved in his library at the Casa-Museo Pérez Galdós in Las Palmas do demonstrate marginal jottings (mainly definitions of elementary English words) that indicate some reading, primarily in the early pages.⁸ In addition to translating *Pickwick Papers*, Galdós also apparently translated at least part of one of Dickens' *Christmas Books*, *The Battle of Life*, sometime before 1876.⁹ To complicate matters, detailed examination shows that he worked mainly from French translations, not the English originals, in both cases—in spite of the assertion at the beginning of his serialization of *Pickwick Papers* that it was "traducida del inglés."

⁵ Among the Hispanists who have taken an interest in the *Aventuras de Pickwick* manuscript and the relationship between Dickens and Galdós are Walter T. Pattison and Charles David Ley. Pattison's article "How Well Did Galdós Know English?", *Symposium*, 24 (1970), pp. 148-157 is particularly helpful. Also see Ley's "Galdós, comparado con Balzac y Dickens, como novelista nacional," *Actas del Primer Congreso Internacional de Estudios Galdosianos* (Las Palmas: Ediciones del Exmo. Cabildo Insular de Gran Canaria, 1977), pp. 291-95; and "Galdós como novelista europeo," *Letras de Deusto*, 4 (1974), pp. 95-113.

⁶ H. Chonon Berkowitz, *La Biblioteca de Benito Pérez Galdós* (Las Palmas: Ediciones El Museo Canario, 1951), pp. 188-189.

⁷ Galdós, *Los artículos de Galdós en 'La Nación', 1865-66, 1868*, p. 453.

⁸ Pattison, pp. 154-55.

⁹ Stephen Gilman discovered the translated pages from *The Battle of Life*; he comments on them briefly in his *Galdós and the Art of the European Novel: 1867-1887* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 137. The pages from the translation of Dickens' novel, a total of seven pages numbered

The fact that Galdós appears to have read Dickens primarily in French translations raises an important question to be considered: How well did Galdós understand the Dickens that he read? And since he read Dickens at second-remove, how accurate is his translation of *Pickwick Papers*? How good can any work be that is translated from its original language into an intermediate language, and finally into a third? What is gained, and what is lost? Can the final product be called rightfully a translation, or rather a "version"?

First, a word on translations. Translating is certainly one of the most difficult endeavors of the imagination, for it is the attempt to re-create sometimes fragile ideas, attitudes, and sound patterns into another tongue with other sounds and other sensibilities. Frederick Turner has written recently that "the question of whether translation can be possible is the central issue of our time," since translation refers ultimately not simply to languages and literatures, but also to cultures, identities, and the whole of human relationships.¹⁰ The ideal translator is a happy combination of writer, linguist, and scholar; he is, as Gogol defined him, "one who becomes a pane of glass which is so transparent that the reader does not notice that there is any glass."¹¹

As one carefully scrutinizes Galdós' translation of *Pickwick Papers*, it quickly becomes evident that the Spanish writer's work is often not a transparent, faithful reproduction of Dickens' masterpiece. Galdós' work is more clearly a translation of the French translation of Dickens' novel—although it does not always adhere perfectly to the French version either, and occasionally shows indications of the novelist Galdós was yet to be. Galdós' greatest deficiency as a translator of Dickens is his limited knowledge of English. Research continues to confirm Walter T. Pattison's convincing argument that Galdós' reportedly thorough knowledge of

132-34 and 136-39, are found on the reverse side of pages 162-68 of the *Doña Perfecta* manuscript in the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid. They are written in a somewhat more formal hand than that of the *Doña Perfecta* manuscript; they have been corrected and refined and then crossed off with the three familiar diagonal lines seen in other manuscripts of Galdós. There may have been additional pages from Dickens' book on the reverse side of *Doña Perfecta*, which is incomplete; the pages from *The Battle of Life* occur just before one of the various lacunae in the manuscript. Galdós possessed in his library a French edition of Dickens' Christmas Books, *Contes de Noël*, which is now preserved in the Casa-Museo Pérez Galdós. In this volume, published in Paris in 1865, one finds *La Bataille de la vie*, an anonymous translation of *The Battle of Life*. An examination of the work reveals several marginal notes and markings, and at the conclusion of the novel, the following numbers:

338

265

173

These latter numbers represent the total number of pages in the text of *La Bataille de la vie*, which begins on page 265 and concludes on page 338. The arithmetic apparently represents Galdós' calculations of the number of pages required for the translation he was doing. We know of no published version of Galdós' translation of *The Battle of Life*, nor do we know of a complete manuscript of such a work.

¹⁰ Frederick Turner, "On Translation," *The Kenyon Review*, IV (1983), p. 1.

¹¹ Cited by Leonard Forster, "Translation: An Introduction," in *Aspects of Translation*, ed. A.D. Booth, et al. (London: Secker and Warburg, 1958), p. 16.

English—supposedly the result of having been “criado en un medio inglés,” as a reporter quoted him as saying in 1910—is greatly exaggerated. Pattison argues, using firsthand evidence from Galdós’ library and marginal annotations in his books, that whatever knowledge of English Galdós had was modest, and what is more, late-coming—probably the result of his early interest in Dickens and British literature and his visits to England during his mature years.¹²

Before examining specific passages from Galdós’ *Las aventuras de Pickwick* to illustrate Galdós’ abilities as translator, the question of why Galdós chose this particular novel to render into Spanish must be discussed. Undoubtedly he was attracted by its Cervantine elements, its modern version of Don Quijote in gaiters and Sancho Panza in livery. Yet even the most experienced reader of Dickens’ “loose baggy monsters” approaches the monumental satire *Pickwick Papers* with trepidation and awe; the work is beguiling and innocent in appearance, yet at once both deceptive and dangerous. Steven Marcus warns that the book represents “the greatest of Dickens’ mysteries.”¹³ Complex and mysterious as *Pickwick* remains, even after many readings (or, rather, especially after many readings), it is nonetheless “one of the purest books in our literature,... because nothing has been purified away. It is the essential, the instinctive Dickens, unhindered, eager, yet somehow miraculously mastered...”¹⁴ The primary difficulty that Galdós or any other translator of *Pickwick Papers* faces immediately is the unavoidable problem of its linguistic complexity. Everything in the novel converges around the important textures and surfaces of various kinds of language—the narrator’s language, the language of law, politics, and bureaucracy, the idiolects of many dozens of characters of varying importance, and a general sense of satirical celebration and linguistic self-consciousness. When, by the end of chapter one, Dickens has introduced the “Pickwickian” sense of language into the resolved altercation between Blotton and Mr. Pickwick, he has not only added a new word to the English lexicon, but has made the language of his own book turn upon itself in high energy, which causes, in part, the inner dynamism of the novel.¹⁵ Stewart describes the writing of Dickens’ first chapter as being “a style in which there is always more saying going on than meaning and which, when cornered, admits to meaning not even the little it seems to mean.”¹⁶ This

¹² Pattison, pp. 153-55. The reporter Pattison cites is El Bachiller Corchuelo, “Nuestros grandes prestigios: Benito Pérez Galdós,” in *Por Esos Mundos*, XX (1910), p. 45.

¹³ Steven Marcus, *Representations* (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 214.

¹⁴ Garrett Stewart, *Dickens and the Trials of the Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 3.

¹⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary defines “Pickwickian” as “language, in a technical, constructive, or conveniently idiosyncratic or esoteric sense; usually in reference to language ‘unparliamentary’ or compromising in its natural sense.” *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

¹⁶ Stewart, pp. 26-27.

sophisticated flatulence is of course the essence of the book's humor and complexity. From the first sentences of *Pickwick*—with their concentrated emphasis on conflated language strained to the limits with pretentiousness and parody—to the imprisonment of Mr. Pickwick in the Fleet Street prison because of a “Pickwickian” misunderstanding with Mrs. Bardell, the importance of the work rests on the various registers of language. Ultimately, its subject matter is language; the novel is a virtuoso creation of dazzling and astonishing verbal tricks.

The great irony of Galdós' translation, simply put, is that it ignores much of the linguistic dazzle of *Pickwick Papers*. (Indeed, in the early part of the translation, Galdós even manages to misinterpret the word “anti-Pickwickian in Dickens' text and renders it “pickwickiana.” The French translation maintains the Dickensian meaning.) Although the French translator strives, not entirely successfully, to preserve some of the idiolects and linguistic subtleties of the novel, Galdós misses important features of the work. The reason? Probably a combination of the haste in which he had to produce pages for regular serialization, as well as an increasing dependence upon the French translation as the work progressed.

Perhaps the best example of both the complexity of Dickens' novel and Galdós' abilities as translator can be seen in the all-important first paragraph of *Pickwick Papers*. The paragraph literally begins at the beginning—of a parodied, mythified world. First we will cite Galdós' version of the paragraph, followed by the French, and finally, the original passage from Dickens:

El primer rayo de luz que iluminó con brillantes resplandores la oscuridad en que la historia de la vida pública del inmortal Pickwick parecía envuelta, consistió en los siguientes documentos insertos en las actas del Club Pickwick. El editor de estos papeles tiene la mayor satisfacción en proporcionarlos a sus lectores, como una prueba de la solícita atención, de la infatigable constancia, de la minuciosidad sutil con que verificó sus investigaciones al examinar los innumerables documentos que se le confiaron.¹⁷

The French:

Le premier jet de lumière que convertit en un clarté brillante les ténèbres dont parissait enveloppée l'apparition de l'immortel Pickwick sur l'horizon du monde savant, la première mention officielle de cet homme prodigieux, se trouve dans les status insérés parmi les procès-verbaux du Pickwick-Club. L'éditeur du présent ouvrage est heureux de pouvoir les mettre sous les yeux de sus lecteurs, comme une preuve de l'attention scrupuleuse, de l'infatigable assiduité, de la sagacité investigatrice, avec lesquelles il a conduit ses recherches, aun sein des nombreux documents confiés à ses soins.¹⁸

¹⁷ From Galdós' *Las aventuras de Pickwick* in the March 9th, 1868 issue of *La Nación*, p. 1.

¹⁸ Charles Dickens, *Aventures de Monsieur Pickwick*, I, trad. sous la direction de P. Lorain par P. Grolier (Paris: Librairie Hachette et Cie, 1865), p. 1

And the original version by Dickens:

The first ray of light which illumines the gloom, and converts into a dazzling brilliancy that obscurity in which the earlier history of the public career of the immortal Pickwick would appear to be involved, is derived from the perusal of the following entry in the Transactions of the Pickwick Club, which the editor of these pages feels the highest pleasure in laying before his readers, as proof of the careful attention, indefatigable assiduity, and nice discriminations, with which his search among the multifarious documents confided to him has been conducted.¹⁹

Martin Price has written that the beginnings of novels indicate the rules of the game to be played in the course of reading the work.²⁰ In *Pickwick Papers*, Dickens' ripe first sentence ushers the reader directly into the mock-epic world of gentle satire. Steven Marcus analyzes the importance and complexity of the beginning of this novel:

It opens with... a single epic sentence, a paragraph long, that closes in a dying fall. It is a parody, which later on and at length we learn is in part not parody. It begins at the beginning, with the 'creation' itself, with the Logos appearing out of 'obscurity'—that is, the 'earlier history... of the immortal Pickwick'—and into the light of creation. But it also dramatizes the fundamental activity of the Logos; it dramatizes the notion of cosmic creation as a word—which is how God, as the Logos, created the world: *fiat Lux*, said God, when he was speaking Latin, and so it was. And here, too, in this novel we begin the creation with a word, with language; with Dickens' language on the one hand and the word 'Pickwickians' on the other.²¹

Galdós' translation of this important passage into Spanish is revealing for what it contains and also for what it does not contain. Both Galdós and the translator of the French edition have divided the "single epic sentence" into two lesser sentences, thus deflating its long-winded style considerably. The effective use of the hollow-sounding repetition (here in triplicate in the second half of the paragraph) remains. Both Galdós and the French version have eliminated the intentional redundancy of "illumines the gloom" and "converts into a dazzling brilliancy" by compressing the compound sentence into a simple sentence; Galdós uses "iluminó" and suppresses "converts," and the French translator chooses "convertit" and suppresses "illumines." Both remove reference to "gloom." Galdós also shifts the verbs of his first sentence from the present tense to the preterit and imperfect ("illumines" to "iluminó"; "is derived" to "consistió en"); the French translation concurs with Dickens' original text, retaining "convertit" and "se trouve" in the present tense. Galdós' changes in tense indicate important changes in the meaning of the text, of course. The immediacy of the

¹⁹ Charles Dickens, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (London: The Oxford Illustrated Dickens, 1948), p. 1.

²⁰ Martin Price, "The Irrelevant Detail and the Emergence of Form," in *Aspects of Narrative: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. J. Hillis Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), p. 82.

²¹ Marcus, p. 220.

original English version, with its pseudo-epical present tense and redundancy for the purpose of mock heroics and amusement, is lost. With the changed tenses in Spanish, the writing is separated from its timeless, mythical overtones and is placed squarely in a historical world of pasts, presents, and futures. This greatly alters the interpretation of Pickwick himself as a character. Dickens' intentions, according to Marcus, were that "literally Pickwick [be] a man without a history, created, as it were, entirely in the present..."²² Galdós does retain, to a degree, the calculatedly passive sense of the paragraph with his "los innumerables documentos que se le confiaron." He has reduced the effect intended by changing "has been conducted" to "verificó." Likewise, the intentional passive "is derived" becomes emphatically active in "consistió en." Similar changes can be found in the French translation. The jubilant parody and pretentiousness of "laying before his readers" (an entry in the Transactions of the Pickwick Club) is neutered in the verb "proporcionar" ("mettre" in French).

Because of the spatial limitations of the present paper, further examples of subtle and none-too-subtle changes in Galdós' translation of *Pickwick Papers* from throughout the book unfortunately are not possible.²³ However, the just-cited paragraph of the novel is a good indication of many of the kinds of changes that Galdós made in the rest of the book. He tends to shy away from the self-mockery of Dickens' original text, and thus loses much of its mythic quality as well as many of the characteristics which modern readers call "Dickensian." A general tendency to shorten, simplify, or rearrange parts of Dickens' text is also shown in the opening paragraph of the book. Galdós' version of the great novel by Dickens tends to be more of a history, with a lesser concern for the bloated rhetoric and circumlocutory style. This tendency reflects not only his difficulties in understanding the original text, but also his preoccupation with history and politics at the time he was engaged in both the translation of *Pickwick Papers* and the writing of *La Fontana de Oro*.

The student of Galdós would wish for a translation of *Las aventuras de Pickwick* by a more mature Galdós with more developed skills in reading English. Clearly the mature Galdós could match Dickens in verbal fireworks and virtuosity. Still, the translation of *Pickwick Papers* completed in 1868 is revelatory of the young Galdós in many important ways, particularly when he infrequently escapes the confines of the French translation and forges, however momentarily, his own "version" of the work. Galdós clearly had neither the aptitude nor the patience to be a translator of others'

²² Steven Marcus, *From Pickwick to Dombey* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 25.

²³ A more complete picture of Galdós as translator of Dickens will be available in the edition I am now preparing of *Las aventuras de Pickwick*, which has not been published since its initial serialization in 1868. This endeavor includes a comparison of Galdós' text with Dickens' original text and the French translation.

works; his translation of *Pickwick* must be read for what it is, a literary laboratory in which he tested his own imagination and abilities against his master.

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¹⁸ Charles Dickens, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (London: The Quaker Press, 1837), 1:22. ¹⁹ Steven Marcus, *From Pickwick to London* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 2:22. ²⁰ A more complete history of Galdos's translation of Dickens will be available in the edition I am now preparing of *La Fontaine de Oro*, which has not been published since its initial translation in 1858. This endeavor includes a comparison of Galdos's text with Dickens's original text and the French translation.