

“POLTRÓN Y PEREZOSO. . .” A QUESTION OF MEANING

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IN THE AUTHOR'S Preface to the First Part of the *Quijote* Miguel de Cervantes states that he has hesitated to bring out a book devoid of the bibliography, the citations from ancient authorities and the marginal notations so current in the literary works of his time and then he goes on to add that he feels himself incapable of remedying this deficiency “*porque naturalmente soy poltrón y muy perezoso de andarme buscando autores que digan lo que yo me sé decir sin ellos.*”¹

I first became interested in the meaning of this passage when I noted that the widely-acclaimed Putnam translation² gives it an interpretation which appears considerably at variance with the connotation of the original, reading: “. . . and I am, moreover extremely lazy when it comes to hunting up authors who will say for me what I am unable to say for myself.”³

The more recent version by Walter Starkie⁴ omits the Preface

¹ The version here given is taken from the facsimile edition of the princeps (Madrid, Juan de la Cuesta, 1605) in Vol. II, *Obras completas de Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra / Edición de La Real Academia Española / Facsimile de las primitivas impresiones . . .* (Madrid), Tipografía de la Revista de Archivos, Bibliotecas y Museos, 1917.

Bonilla and Schevill add a comma after the word *autores* (of line 16-18, p. 32, Tomo I: *Obras Completas de Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra . . .* Madrid / Gráficas Reunidas S. A. / MCMXXVIII).

However the *Clásicos Castellanos* edition by Rodríguez Marín (Madrid, Espasa Calpe 1941) originally printed in 1911 follows the reading of the princeps, as does the printing, without editorial apparatus, by Editorial “Saturnino-Calleja,” S. A., Madrid, n. d. (c. 1936).

² See reviews of the translation by Samuel Putnam in *Time*, Oct. 3, 1949, p. 76-78 and in *The New Yorker*, Oct. 7, 1949, p. 73-77.

³ *The Portable Cervantes / Translated and Edited / with an Introduction / and notes, by Samuel Putnam*: New York, The Viking Press, 1955 (c. 1949) p. 51.

⁴ *Don Quixote / of La Mancha / by Miguel de Cervantes. Saavedra and abridged version designed to relate without digressions the principal adventures of the Knight and his Squire Translated and Edited / with an Introduction / by Walter Starkie* New York, The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1957.

from the abridged form of the novel now on the bookstalls. But on turning to that of John Ormsby, for many years considered a standard, we find: ". . . and because I am by nature shy and careless about hunting for authors to say what I myself can say without them."⁵ This is an improvement over Putnam and very close to Henry Edward Watts: ". . . because I am by nature too indolent and slow to go looking for authors to say what I myself can say without them."⁶

Smollett makes it: ". . . I am naturally too bashful and indolent to go in quest of authors to say what I myself can say as well without their assistance."⁷ While Charles Jarvis reads: ". . . because I am naturally too idle and lazy to hunt after authors, to say what I can say as well without them."⁸ The most widely printed English version, that of Peter Motteux, has: ". . . besides, I am naturally lazy and love my ease too well to take Pains of turning over Authors for those things I can express as well without it."⁹ Cervantes' contemporary, Thomas Shelton, ". . . and also because I am naturally lazy and unwilling to go searching for authors to say that which I can say well enough without them."¹⁰

A comparison of the several renderings indicates that those of Jarvis and Motteux are closest to the spirit of the original. It also appears that the variations lie chiefly in interpretation of the Spanish word "*poltrón*" which lacks the connotation of its English cognate "*poltroon*" and can not properly be read as "unwilling," "bashful," "shy," or "slow" although both Webster¹¹ and the NED¹² define the latter as: "A spiritless coward; a mean spirited wretch; a craven." Only in Funk and Wagnalls¹³ do we find the

⁵ *The Ingenious Gentleman / Don Quixote / of la Mancha . . . A Translation, with introduction and notes / by / John Ormsby / . . .* New York, Thomas G. Crowell Company, n. d., Vol. I, LXXVII. First published 1885.

⁶ P. 8, Vol. I of version published in London by Charles and Adam Black, 1895. This first appeared in 1888.

⁷ The eighteenth century translation of Tobias Smollett was examined in the (London) printing by S. Rousseau . . . for J. Stratford, 1811, p. vii.

⁸ Consulted in the version printed at London by Henry G. Bohn in 1842.

⁹ Cf. p. xxi, London, 1700, Ozell's revision, edited by Herschell Brickell, New York, The Modern Library, (c. 1930).

¹⁰ Shelton's translation of 1612, 1620 was reprinted, with introduction by James Fitzmaurice-Kelly in London by David Nutt, 1896. Cf. p. 7.

¹¹ *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language, Second Edition, Unabridged.* Springfield, Mass., 1957.

¹² *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles . . . Edited by Sir James A. H. Murray,* Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1909.

¹³ . . . *New "Standard Dictionary,"* New York, Funk & Wagnalls, 1957.

secondary meaning of: “A lazy idler; a sluggard.” which is most appropriate in this case.

Derived from the Italian “*poltrone*” (a bed or couch) Sebastian de Covarrubias¹⁴ in 1611 defined it as “El moço floxo y holgaçán, que con poco trabajo se cansa y trassuda. Está tomada de la metáfora de las bestias que las sustentan con salvado cocido y con la harina de havas hecha puches. Quasi *pultrón a pulte*. Poltronería, aquel vicio. Es más italiano que español.” And the Spanish Academy¹⁵ defines it as: “Flojo, perezoso, haragán, enemigo del trabajo.”

Hence it appears that in his apposition of the terms “poltrón y perezoso” Cervantes was merely following the common sixteenth century practice¹⁶ of joining adjectives of approximately the same significance to reinforce his idea.

While it is entirely possible to equate *perezoso* with such terms as “careless,” “indolent,” “idle,” “lazy,”¹⁷ it appears that the frequently reviled¹⁸ translation of Peter Motteux achieves the best rendering of the term *poltrón* in this particular passage, and the one nearest in time and spirit to the original: “. . . love my ease too well. . . .”

Truly, as Cervantes himself was to say on another occasion: “. . . translation from one language to another . . . is like looking at Flemish tapestries on the wrong side; for though the figures are visible, they are full of threads that make them indistinct and they do not show with the smoothness and brightness of the right side. . . .”¹⁹

¹⁴ Sebastian de Covarrubias: *Tesoro de la Lengua Castellana of Española . . .* (Madrid, 1611) edition by Martín de Riquer, Barcelona, S. A. Horta, I. E., 1943.

¹⁵ Real Academic de la Lengua Española, *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, Madrid, Espasa-Calpe, 1939.

¹⁶ See discussion of this stylistic trait by Ramón Menéndez Pidal in his *La Lengua de Colón*, Buenos Aires, Espasa-Calpe, 1952.

¹⁷ Mariano Velázquez de la Cadena. *A New Pronouncing Dictionary of the Spanish and English Languages . . .* Chicago and New York, Wilcox and Follett Company, 1946.

¹⁸ A Summary of the more common criticisms of the Motteux version is found in the reviews of the Samuel Putnam translation cited in note 2, above.

¹⁹ P. 437, Vol. II, Ormsby translation of the Quixote (cited in note 5).