

Russell Hoban, ed. 2011: *Dudo Errante*. Translated by David Cruz and M.^a Luisa Pascual. Madrid: Cátedra. 368 pp. ISBN: 9788437628943.

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Writing a science-fiction novel review is never an easy task. All too often, prejudice against the genre comes to burden the critique, leading it towards an apology for the genre rather than towards a proper critical analysis of the literary work. A related problem is that quite often the critics leave unexplained key questions that remain unperceived by lay readers, as well as other different and uncommon ways of reading the works. The reviewing process is usually worthwhile due to the satisfaction of facilitating access to excellent works of art for a wider readership who wouldn't have approached such titles otherwise.

Such is the case with *Dudo Errante* (in English, *Riddley Walker*), but it is further complicated by the numerous levels of interpretation that the novel invites. The translation of this work by David Cruz and María Luisa Pascual is published by Cátedra, within the Letras populares collection, edited by Ana Ramos and Javier Fernández, in an attempt to enhance the status of the genre.

Although the plot of the novel itself is not as important as the combination of the elements implemented in it, it is worth summarizing at this point: in two and a half thousand years' time, and after what seems to be a nuclear disaster, western civilization as we know it no longer exists: Technologically, humanity has reverted to the Iron Age; written texts barely exist and thus hardly anyone can read. In the midst of this devastation there are only tribal governments, with no complex organization or strong legislative or legal systems and, obviously, no separation of powers. The protagonist, Dudo, undertakes a personal investigation of the history of the world, travelling through different spaces. The *bildungsroman* plot itself, however, is perhaps not the most interesting feature of the novel. It is its style that proves more innovative and difficult to translate. That said, novels are not written with ideas but with words, and in this case words go beyond ideas. The following translated paragraph may suffice to convey the complexity of this task:

Todo tiene su forma i tan bien la noche solo que no puedes ver la forma de la noche ni la puedes imaginar. Si stas predispueto la puedes intuir. No con el saver de tu cabeça sino con aquel 1^{er} saber. Donde las numerosas trepadoras crezen en las piedras muertas i la tierra sta dolida por las excauaciones de 3 dias la noche todauia conoce su propia forma aunque nos otros no la conozemos. A vezes la noche tiene forma de oreja mas no se trata de 1 oreja de la

qual conozcamos la forma. Atenta a todos los sonidos que se nos han ido. Al murmullo de las ciudades muertas i a voces anteriores a que las ciudades stuuieran alli. Antes de que hubiera yerro i fuego. Squcha lo que sta por venir tan bien. (90)

It took Russell Hoban five years to write *Riddley Walker*. While it is not always necessary to delve into the circumstances of an author's life in order to understand a novel, sometimes biographical data may help to enrich the reading. The writing of this novel, widely considered to be his masterwork, coincides with the author's divorce in the US and his move to live in England: a traumatic situation that forced him towards a complete reassessment of his opinions of the world and its sociocultural structures, as is explained in the introduction. In this regard, assertions about the assumed postmodernism of the novel are rooted in his manner of questioning any supposedly absolute epistemological system. His tempestuous personal process of questioning the world is thus transmitted through *Dudo Errante*.

The linguistic "clash" between his country of origin, the US, and England, his adopted country, enlightened him about the way in which language builds reality, leading him to write a novel with a "broken," "reconstructed" and imperfectly crafted language. This places the novel in what we might refer to as a despairing future, where neither normative English nor any kind of linguistic regularity exists. There is also a complete lack of real connection with the English language of 1980, the year in which the novel was finally published. The fragmentation and the re-creation of the English language establish the main resources of the novel at all levels, keeping readers in a constant struggle with the language through the numerous vacillations they encounter. The resulting difficulty in comfortably following the plot, due to this lexical and grammatical defamiliarization, produces a strong feeling of estrangement towards the world of the novel, which, despite the acute differences with our known world, invites us to identify with its social and intimate conflicts. The language of *Dudo Errante* is therefore a metaphor for all the irregularities of our own experience of the world, this way of reflecting our reality in comparison to another very distant one, normally placed in the future, being the main characteristic of science fiction, according to Darko Suvin's definition in his work *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979). Hoban uses numerous strategies characteristic of a particular science fiction subgenre: post-apocalyptic fiction. However, such impressive linguistic accomplishment is not frequent, even among the greatest works of this mode. A number of critics have praised Hoban's adroitness, and Harold Bloom included the novel in his work *The Western Canon* (1994), while the author Anthony Burgess wrote that *Riddley Walker* was exactly what literature should be (12). Many similar references are collected in the introduction of this Spanish edition.

Not only does the fragmented discourse complicate the reading of the novel, but it also merges with the protagonist's investigation of History, which is as fragmented as that we today have inherited from the ancient past. Deformations of Dudo's world, which sadden us and make us think about the ignorance of its wise men, draw attention to our own

ignorance. Hence, the novel is a projection of all the doubts we have in relation to our own knowledge, however we might understand it. The culture created by folklore is another way of understanding the world for Dudo. Hoban inserts this perspective into the novel through samples of oral literature from our world, a resource already brilliantly used by Ursula K. Le Guin in works such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *Always Coming Home* (1985). In this sense, it seems that folklore functions as both an alternative to history and as its complement, deforming and restructuring, embellishing and confusing our ideas about the past.

On the one hand, therefore, we are confronted with a hard, devastating work that does not make easy reading, but on the other we encounter a novel beautiful in its understanding of literature. Its severity reflects all there is to Western middle-class comfort and falseness, as has been described in some contemporary science fiction novels, such as the post-apocalyptic *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy (2006) and *Plop*, by Rafael Pinedo (2007).

All the above is carefully explained in a detailed and thorough introduction to the Spanish edition by the translators: María Luisa Pascual and David Cruz. In the itinerary focused on their Derridian vision of the novel, the two translators establish the relations between the structure, the author, the narrator, the characters and the discourse, providing consistently accurate and clear clues to their interpretation of the work. The only issue which, in my opinion, is left unclear is the distinction between the dystopian and the post-apocalyptic genre. In contrast to in dystopias, the post-apocalyptic society does not form a state system based on the complex structure of legislation and social concepts. As a matter of fact, the examples of classical dystopias quoted by Pascual and Cruz in the introduction to this edition have very little to do with the scarcely civilized atmosphere and city dwellers of post-apocalyptic stories. The differences between the genre characteristics of novels such as *A Brave New World*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *We*, 1984, *The Road*, *Earth Abides* and *A Canticle for Leibowitz* are quite obvious. The “dystopian element” normally appears in negative future scenarios, but not every negative future scenario is a dystopia. However, this confusion does not result from a lack of references, for the translators do indeed offer very interesting sources. One is the work of Carl Freedman on the relations between literary theory and science fiction, which is, however, combined with hardly enlightening and informative texts like those written by Sergio Gaut Vel Hartman. The former could have been developed more and the latter given less space. Nevertheless, the different theoretical perspectives from which this thorough analysis is approached are very enriching and prevent readers from getting lost within unnecessary labyrinths. The translators’ introduction is a valuable and interesting tool for understanding the novel, as they bring the perspective of the expert literary translator who has intimately identified with the writer’s obsession with the deconstruction of language. Their perspective stems from the language and it continues towards the very language, passing on its way through society, culture, history. That is to say, the overall context is considered to be language itself.

In this regard, their notes on the translation process, some of which were included in the previous Spanish edition of the novel published by Berenice, are priceless. This

apparently impossible work—translating Hoban’s novel into Spanish—is shown to be that of goldsmiths and rightly won the Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies Translation Prize in 2005. Further testament to their work is that Hoban had banned any kind of translation to another language, until he discovered and approved the project of Pascual and Cruz.

This amazingly crafted Cátedra edition is complemented with some of Hoban’s drawings—he was also an illustrator—with detailed notes at the end of the introduction, a useful glossary and some of the annotations of the author himself.

In conclusion, this is by no means an easy text, but rather an arduous and deconstructive work. Nonetheless, it exploits the unsuspected limits of literature in a way that has been achieved by only a few of the writers of the British New Wave.

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