

SPANIEN
Sprühende Kreativität
*Ehregast der
Frankfurter Buchmesse 2022*



19.–23. Oktober 2022
**FRANKFURTER
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Ehregast Spanien

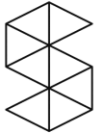
Irene Vallejo

Inaugural Speech, 18 October 2022

There is an atlas where all territories are my homeland. I have roamed across them with my eyes, which move like travelers through snowy paper meadows on the trail of those dark footprints – letters.

What hands gave us a passport to such vast geography? These daring journeys are possible thanks to the work of translation, which opens up universes unknown to us. As José Saramago wrote, writers create national literatures, while translators build world literature. I want to convey in public my endless gratitude to those who have given me a home in their language, those who are willing to be me so I can be another, my family of Babel. At this very moment, my words unfurl in translation. The same river with different water. An identical score, played on a different instrument. This speech echoes in parallel dimensions, allowing us to be together; the ideas keep pulsing inside a new skin. This is the art of joining universes together, a task that takes place behind the scenes and among the shadows.

I'd like to ask you to sharpen your ears and hear, though it sounded centuries ago, the rhythmic clatter of horseshoes. The riders are wise men: astronomers, physicists, mathematicians, philosophers. They come from all over Europe, by land and sea. The stench of sweat from roads, forests, inns, stables, and ports rises from their dusty clothes: in the Late Middle Ages, a foul smell is a reliable travel companion. These malodorous men, hungry for knowledge, travel to the city of Toledo in Castilla, a crossroads of east and west, the place where the embers of Classical and Byzantine wisdom – enriched by Indian scientific and literary knowledge, reinterpreted by Islamic culture, and brought to the Iberian Peninsula by the Umayyad dynasty – are preserved and carefully translated. A long Mediterranean history of splendor is concentrated in this frontier territory. What are our stinking characters looking for? They have crossed the continent in search of translations that they will copy and send lurching around in trunks or saddlebags to the universities, monasteries, and studios of Montpellier, Marseilles, Paris, Bologna, Pisa, Oxford, Prague, Vienna, and Heidelberg.



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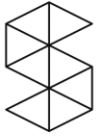
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In that frontier territory of Toledo, a fabulous school of translators had been born, whose ripple effects reached Salamanca, Sevilla, and Tarazona, where schools, translation centers, libraries, and spaces dedicated to shared knowledge began to blossom. Rarely do we remember today that the Indian Panchatantra or the works of Aristotle that were lost in the West arrived in Europe along these routes. They were translated from Arabic into Spanish as early as 1080, and from there, centuries later, from Latin into German or English. European thinkers of the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries drank from these sources via the well of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, both profoundly influenced by Ibn Arabi of Murcia and Averroes of Cordoba.

At first, while sufficiently intelligent and tolerant kings were in power, libraries were protected, and the different communities of Jewish, Muslim, Mozarabic Christian and Roman Christian scholars could work together. Those wise translators were tenacious and hybrid in their approach. They invented vocabulary to explain new ideas. Our debt to their searches and their efforts is immense: some classics have reached us only as translations. Certain works indispensable for understanding Europe survived the shipwreck of time because these scholars cared for them in strange lands and foreign cultures. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, translation shines in the eternal survival of the work and the endless revival of languages.

Cervantes paid them subtle homage. The *Quixote* is presented as the translation of a chronicle written by an imaginary Muslim scholar named Cide Hamete Benengeli. At a frenetic moment in the knight's errantry, the manuscript is interrupted and Cervantes, the narrator, desperately searches for another copy to find out how the story ends. The place where we will recover the thread of the story is, of course, Toledo. A mysterious sheaf of papers with writings in Arabic appears in a marketplace in the city. A Morisco passing through discovers in these pages the adventures of Don Quixote and is commissioned to translate them. Once the Spanish version is ready, we can dive back into our reading. I'm fascinated by the fact that this classic is disguised as a translation. Cervantes is being playful, yes, but it is also a recognition of that braid of cultures, languages, and philosophies that once defined us.

After two or three centuries of fragile truce, this hybridity sadly swerved towards the obsession with racial purity, and the expulsions suffered by Moriscos and Sephardic Jews. Yet despite this, like Don Quixote himself, Spanish literature can trace its origins



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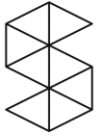


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to La Mancha, and is written in ink tinted – manchada – with hybridity and mixing and with its varied languages and accents. That ultimate hybrid form, the novel, attained its modern form in Spain. The picaresque novel, our peculiar contribution, is packed with bawdy, unwholesome misfits. From the *Celestina*, probably written by a Jew, to the scorned and starving *Lazarillo de Tormes*, and the travels through the European underworld in *Portrait of Lozana: The Lusty Andalusian Woman*. The fruits of other wounds and cultural fusions will follow: Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, the Cuban-Spanish Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, who wrote the first anti-slavery novel in history, the mongrel ballads of Federico García Lorca, and the black, gypsy heart of flamenco.

Literary history is also riddled with exiles, another feature of frontier life. Writers deprived of their readers, banned in their homeland, depend on translations to access that inalienable country made of readers. My parents often told me of the backrooms of bookstores during the dictatorship, where, with a spirit of adventure, they took the risk of buying copies of banned titles in editions that came from abroad. Again, what belonged to one place was saved elsewhere. One of those exiled writers, the philosopher María Zambrano, wrote that thought is born from the act of asking, when an idea breaks the molds that contain it. This is what makes translation a philosophical task brimming with questions, rupture, and rebirth. Or, as Goethe said in his *West-Eastern Divan*, “the nearing of the foreign to the familiar, of the known to the unknown.”

At this moment, the same speech is being made with words lovingly threaded together by a voice that is not my voice, recast in the seclusion of the cubicle. Can you hear it? While the talk that divides us blusters on, let us celebrate those editors and translators who, silently, among the faithful shadows, rebuild with the stones of complexity an imagination where shared hope can dwell. Frankfurt is precisely a capital and crossroads of translations. Literature and ideas come here in search of a second skin, of boundless rebirths. When we translate, we set out from difference to reclaim closeness. We affirm that to be faithful, we must use our imagination. Like Goethe, we know that foreign languages seek one another and need one another, exchanging gifts and metaphors among themselves. Like María Zambrano, we seek exile in the never-ending land of pages to explore the most daring questions. Like Cervantes, we hope that, in the hubbub of a marketplace, a bilingual stranger might make the story go on. We are the descendants – showered and sweet-smelling – of those travelers eager for



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knowledge who, centuries ago, rode to Toledo in search of the mysterious and hybrid roads that lead to books.

Translated by Charlotte Whittle