

# Love in Translation : Contemporary Spanish Translations of The Ring of the Dove, an Arabic Treatise on Love from Muslim Spain

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# Love in Translation:

## Contemporary Spanish Translations of *The Ring of the Dove*, an Arabic Treatise on Love from Muslim Spain<sup>1</sup>

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When I was asked to suggest a topic for a cycle of lectures revolving around the theme of translation, I found myself hesitant, as I am not an expert in translation studies. Incidentally, I must acknowledge that I always found uneasy the task of accrediting my research to a specific academic field. My main area of investigation is the “European Interaction with the Islamic Culture, from the Late Middle Ages to the Modern Period, with special regard to Italy, Spain and France.” Through the years I had to squeeze this topic into a variety of official academic labels: history of criticism, history of ideas, intercultural studies. Depending on the Department that hired me, the tags often changed, ranging from Italian Studies to Comparative Literature. The most pompous one was probably the title of a course that I taught for several years: Hermeneutics and History of Criticism.

More recently I found a convenient shelter in the notion of Mediterranean Studies, a field that aims at analysing cultural phenomena (literature included) across the borders of national and religious identities. From the ancient times to the contemporary world, from Spain to Turkey, from Italy and France to the Arabic world, the Mediterranean looks like a quite hospitable space, to academics and oftentimes to tourists (not the same to migrants): instead of being pinned on the ground of national identities, this area opens up to the study of themes whose features mostly ignore national and academic partitions. To a certain extent, the

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Mediterranean Studies, originating from the work of historians such as Fernand Braudel, Shelomo Dov Goitein and David Abulafia, or geographers such as Peregrine Horden, thrives on blank-spots characterizing traditional approaches to the study of European and Mediterranean societies and their cultural production.

There is no doubt that translation is one of the core topic of the Mediterranean as a polycentric and often conflicting space. One might even argue that what the Mediterranean is all about is a constant effort of translation from a language to another, from a civilization to another. Conflicts and wars do not constitute a real obstacle to this translation process. On the contrary, they are part of the same dynamics. The Mediterranean, that is etymologically “the sea in the middle of the earth,” a sea surrounded by lands, is a connecting medium, rather than a separation. Paradigmatic of this space, are for instance the extensive translations of Greek sciences and Indian wisdom in the Abbasid early Islamic world; the circulation of Indian collections of tales in Western Europe, such as the *Book of Sindbad* or the *Kalila and Dimna*; the systematic Latin translations of Arabic scientific works in Medieval Spain; or the increasingly methodical process of “volgarizzamento,” that is the translation of Latin, Greek and old French sources into Italian vernacular, in the Late Middle Ages and in the Renaissance. Translations of ancient or foreign texts has often been a symbol of kingship in the Christian and Muslim Mediterranean, alongside the patronage of the arts.

My contribution has a tangential relationship with translation studies: I would like to present some reflexions on historical circumstances prompting specific translations, by briefly discussing the case of a contemporary Spanish translation of an Arabic text, the *Tawq al-hamama* (*The Ring of the Dove*). This Medieval Arabic treatise on love is a fascinating letter-tract, a *risāla* (name of this genre in Arabic) on the matter of love and the lovers. It has been described as an elegant prose dissertation on aspects of profane love interspersed with verses. Its author, the Andalusian Ibn Hazm of Cordoba, born in 994 and died in 1064, was a courtier and polymath, raised in the sophisticated Andalusian court of the Omayyad Caliphate. The largest bulk of Ibn Hazm’s work consists of theological and juridical works, written during his exile, at the fall of the Omayyad dynasty, and rediscovered by Spanish scholars such as the priest Miguel Asín Palacios at the beginning of the last century. But what has undoubtedly gained to this author notoriety

among common readers has been his letter on love: intermingling prose and poetry, this text makes definitions of the features of love livelier by resorting to autobiographic memories and humorous tales. What emerges from the pages of this treatise is the vivid image of Muslim Spain, from the privileged standpoint of an Andalusian aristocrat.

It would be tempting to put aside abstract speculations and pick up a few suggestive excerpts from the thirty chapters of the *Tawq al-hamama*, just to savor the reading. Few other pre-modern texts have the same capacity to resonate with the mind of a contemporary reader. Another one would probably be Murasaki's *Genji Monogatari*, not by chance expressive of a sophisticated court environment, and whose author is contemporaneous with Ibn Hazm. However, the question I will instead deal with is apparently peripheral to the text itself but still very related to its core, as I will try to show.

In spite of its originality, or perhaps precisely as a consequence of it, the *Tawq al-hamama* fell soon into oblivion in the Arabic world. Its content was audacious and nonconformist. It is fair to assume that the text did not meet the mainstream taste of the time. As for the European contexts, the treatise went apparently undetected by the cohort of Medieval Latin translators, who made available to European readers large sections of the Arabic sciences, philosophy and literature. But one should also underline that the treatise was not written for a large readership in the first place. Even though readers in the Middle Ages represented an elite in itself, both in the Arabic and in the European world, the author of the *Tawq al-hamama* was probably little interested in generic *literati*: his work was meant to be a mirror of a very exclusive network of individuals, affiliated to the Omayyad court. And when the Omayyad dynasty was wiped away by internal feuds and its capital ransacked by North African tribes, the treatise followed the same destiny, becoming a relic of a lost world.

The single extant Arabic copy of *The Ring of the Dove* was found in the Library of the University of Leiden by the Dutch orientalist Reinhard Dozy only eight centuries later, in 1851. And eighty additional years had to pass before European translators took notice of this text. However, the first English translation realized in 1931 by the Czech-American orientalist Alois Richard Nykl marks a turning point in the reception of the text: in the space of two years a Russian translation

followed it. Then in 1941 the text was translated in German; in 1949, French and Italian translations were provided by two of the most renowned and talented scholars of the time, Bercher and Gabrieli. And in 1952 the Spanish scholar Emilio García Gómez released the first Spanish translation of the *Tawq al-hamama*, to which he had started working almost thirty years before, as he reveals in his introduction to the text. The following year, in 1953, a new English translation was made available by Arthur Arberry, a prolific British scholar of Arabic, Persian, and Islamic studies. Easy enough to spot is the relatively short lapse of time intervening between each translation.

This almost simultaneous European interest in the *Tawq al-hamama*, a Medieval Arabic treatise on love, is significant and should be regarded as a single episode in the history of this work's reception. In order to understand the way all these translations are mutually interrelated, it would be fruitful to have a close look at linguistic choices made by each translator: it is in the fine grain of each translation that one will find the footprints of each translator's intellectual background and even more importantly of his expectations. It might sound as a statement of the obvious to say that translations are never neutral operations, but it is worth reminding that the language to which a translator resorts is historically and individually marked. Moreover, when a text is translated, that means, "transported" from a linguistic atmosphere to another; the "planet" that receives it is not vacuum-sealed. It is an environment saturated with expectations, worldviews, biases, preferences, inclinations, contrasting opinions, etc. Possibly the quality of a translation is directly proportioned to the translator's awareness about all these internal and external influences. And yet, notwithstanding the translator's care and skillfulness, the text in translation may need to struggle in order to find its right place in the new environment: its new audience might be able to appreciate only a limited aspect of it, or might stress a facet that was not the author's main concern. It might as well be the case that over the time the text in translation will finally find a reader capable of tuning with its fundamental note, in spite of what gets lost in translation.

However, I will not walk down this arduous path and try to gather samples from the numerous contemporaneous translations of the *Tawq al-hamama* in European languages. Instead, I will focus on the academic debate that triggered the increas-

ing European interest in this text, ultimately stimulating its translations. In order to do so, I will limit my very few references to two writings that accompany the arguably most significant among these translations. I am referring to the Spanish rendering of the text, entitled *El collar de la paloma*, published in 1952. The translator, Emilio García Gómez, a diplomat and Spanish Orientalist, whose international recognition bought him partial immunity from the diktats of the Franco regime, signed an ample introduction to the text, dated June 1950. In addition to this introduction, the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, author of renown works such as *The Revolt of the Masses*, or *The Dehumanization of Art*, was asked to write a Prologue that vigorously captures a philosophical aspect of this translation, and of any translation more in general.

When I say that in many respects the Spanish translation of the *Tawq al-hamama* is the most relevant, I do not refer to its intrinsic qualities. For instance, I find the Italian translation by the orientalist Francesco Gabrieli very sound and fresh, even seventy years after its first appearance. Conversely, critics underlined various flaws that characterized the Spanish edition; some even maliciously implied a charge of plagiarism. And perhaps it is not by chance if a new Spanish translation appeared in 2009. Its relevance is ideological, as one can easily infer from reading the closing paragraph of García Gómez's introduction:

*The Ring of the Dove* is meant to occupy an exceptional place in the list of works that Europe consecrated to love, from Plato to Stendhal, passing through Ovid, the Provençal Courts of Love, Dante, Petrarch, Leo the Hebrew and many others... It was about time that this marvelous book saw the light of day in the language that nowadays is spoken in the same lands in which the book was first written.<sup>2</sup>

This quote summarizes some of the main arguments found in Garcia Gomez's introduction. It is an ideological statement. Prominent in this quote is the word "Europe." The paragraph, as the whole introduction, is filled with references to a passionate cultural debate, that was to become the trigger of contemporary Euro-

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<sup>2</sup> The translation from Spanish is mine.

pean interest in this Arabic treatise on love. What the scholar García Gómez is saying here is that the *Tawq al-hamama*, an Andalusian work, is to be considered integral part of an ideal European canon on the matter of love, alongside Plato, Ovid, Dante, etc. If the implications of this sentence were not fully clear, I would paraphrase it in this way: the Islamic-Arabic culture of an Andalusian author forms integral part of the European cultural heritage.

In effect, from the first English translation of the treatise, published in 1931 by the Czech-American orientalist Alois Richard Nykl, what seemed to matter the most about the text was its possible influence on the European idea of courtly love, as it was developed by Medieval Provençal troubadours or in the poetry of Italian authors such as Guido Guinizelli and Dante Alighieri. Nykl, whose research interests overcame traditional compartmentalization of Arabic and Romance literatures, was the author of a book, whose title probably does not need explanations: *Hispano-Arabic Poetry and Its Relations with the Old Provençal Troubadours* (1946). He was a leading figure of the so-called “Arabic theory,” a current of studies that found supporters primarily in Spain, but also in Italy, and other European and American contexts. The “Arabic theory” aimed at proving the influence of Arabic civilization on European Medieval literatures. Such theory was, and still partially is, controversial. On the one hand scholars like Nykl looked, generously and perhaps naively, for any possible link connecting Islamic and European authors; on the other hand, their enthusiastic openness toward the Arabic culture was received with skepticism or even harshness by mainstream scholarship, centered on historiographic narratives based on national identities.

Critics apparently based their dismissive assessment of the “Arabic theory” on “pure facts” and on “scientific ground,” but in reality, they were often conditioned by Eurocentric preconceptions. The roots of Western European civilization were to be found only in the ancient Greece and in Judaic-Christian legacy. It was not conceivable to associate the idea of Europe with cultures that were judged at the least incompatible. The scientific method often worked as a brush stroke that gave the color of objectivity to a variety of ideological biases. It is almost superfluous to quote here the groundbreaking work of Edward Said on European orientalism.

So, love did not seem to really matter here. At play in the exhumation of the Arabic-Andalusian treatise on love seemed primarily at work passion, instead of

love: cultural and political passion. In fact, if we read between the lines of García Gómez's quote, we find that what he is implicitly arguing for is a new way of looking at Spanish history. The nine centuries of Islamic (and Judaic) presence in the peninsula had finally to be recognized as an intrinsic part of Spanish identity. Moreover, claiming a new approach to the history of Spain had evident political implications, because it openly contrasted with the need for intellectual conformism permeating Spain under the Franco regime. For instance, innovative historians such as Américo Castro, quoted by García Gómez in his introduction, had to flee Spain in order to pursue their research, based on an ambitiously new understanding of Spanish history.

European translations of a valuable Arabic treatise on love were the outcome of an academic debate that was not primarily concerned with the exceptionality of the treatise itself. Historical circumstances in which translators operated seemed to matter more than the intrinsic originality of the work. But in spite of all, this was still a great gain for contemporary readers, who were allowed to access a book otherwise lost to them or whose access was limited to a handful of specialists. And in the end, it is up to each new reader to make the most of a book, despite the circumstances that brought the translations about. As the Latin saying goes, *pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli*, "the fate of the books depends on the capabilities of the reader."

For many decades this current of studies has challenged academic conformism. However, it is about time we historicize this debate and focus on its fecund outcomes. The prologue to the Spanish translation of the *Tawq al-hamama*, written by the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, offers some thought-provoking hint to this end. Regardless of the old-fashioned nature of many points made by the author, the vigor and sharpness of his approach to the text is still fresh. The prologue starts from an historical premise that frees further interpretations of the Arabic treatise from the need to prove its genealogical affinity with any following manifestation of the European Middle Ages:

The European Middle Ages are, in their own reality, inseparable from the Islamic civilization, since they consist precisely in the coexistence, positive and negative at a time, of Christianity and Islam *over a shared area, perme-*



*ated with Greco-Roman culture.* Hence, the only adequate point of view is to consider the [split between] this two sides of the Medieval world irrelevant: the apparent duality and discrepancy are to be envisaged as a unity and sameness, conjugated in two different ways.<sup>3</sup>

Once, a Japanese acquaintance told me that when the Western and the Islamic civilizations are considered from afar, they look very much the same: they are parts of the same unity. But what Ortega y Gasset is doing is different: while apparently taking the side of the so-called “Arabic theory,” in reality is removing the interpretation of the text from approaches, prevailing at the time, based on questions that, no matters their open-mindedness, were not inherent to the text. His intention becomes even more manifest in the following quote:

The book [*Tawq al-hamama*] addresses love as a theme. Since long ago, I have been envisaging and postulating a new kind of philology. When facing a text, the goal that this new philology would prioritize, is to get a firm grip of what the book is actually about. It is indispensable to put an end to a philology solely interested in words, and that believes to have fulfilled its mission by relating a text to other texts, and so ad infinitum.

Ortega is dismissing here a genealogical approach to texts, that ultimately aims at placing them in a web of influences, those neglecting the peculiar voice of the author. Translators, even more acutely than their readers, have to resist to a temptation, that is to believe that there are universal realities, and that each language has different words to express them. Let’s take an almost corrive example from the *Tawq al-hamama*: what does happen when we translate a variety of Arabic terms with the English word *love*, whose meaning is only deceitfully universal and crystal-clear? Perhaps, we overlook the fact that *love* is a European cultural construct, whose meaning is to be found in an extremely complex and stratified tradition. If we think that the world *love* adequately translates a constellation of Arabic terms, and that in the end *love is love*, despite languages and traditions, then

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<sup>3</sup> The translation from Spanish is mine.

perhaps we miss something fundamental. The work of the translator is not just to find the term, or set of terms, corresponding to a word found in the original text. It is a more difficult and somehow philosophical task. Here is Ortega's quote:

To consider that a human phenomenon such as love, has always existed, and will always exist in the same form, is like wrongly believing that man, like minerals, vegetables and animals, possesses a pre-established and fixed nature, while ignoring that everything relating to man is historical. Everything is historical, even what actually belongs to his nature, as for instance the instincts.

Translating is somehow a mission impossible: it deals with the ever-changing nature of human constructs. According to Ortega, human nature is historical by essence. The task of translating might be even more problematic for a translator brought up in European schools, accustomed to the notion that universal ideas preexist the world itself, as Plato taught us. How can we then ever be able to translate faithfully a text, if the nature of language itself bears witness of this everlasting change intrinsic to human nature? Is Ortega's warning throwing us into the despair of relativism? Perhaps the answer to these puzzling questions cannot be found only in reassuring methods. Ultimately what seems to count the most when we read and translate a text is not the final result, but the listening process. We need a keen ear, trained through the years to appreciate the silence from which words surface.