

The "Spanish-Speaking Moor" of Marrakesh

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This is how the discovery occurred: — One day I was in the Alcana at Toledo, when a lad came to sell some parchments and old papers to a silk merchant. Now as I have a taste for reading even torn papers lying in the streets, I was impelled by my natural inclination to take up one of the parchment books the lad was selling, and saw in it characters which I recognized as Arabic. But though I could recognize them I could not read them, and looked around to see if there was some Spanish-speaking Moor about ("un morisco aljamiado") to read them to me; and it was not difficult to find such an interpreter there. For, even if I had wanted one for a better and older language, I should have found one. In short, chance offered me one, to whom I explained what I wanted, placing the book in his hands. He opened it in the middle and after reading a little began to laugh. . . ."

— Cervantes, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*

ONE OF THE MOST REMARKABLE CITIZENS of Marrakesh at the turn of the new millennium is a Spaniard named Juan Goytisolo. He left Spain nearly half a century ago, during the oppressive years of the Franco dictatorship, along with all sorts of other writers, intellectuals and artists. And like many other literary exiles of the twentieth century of all nationalities he sought a special kind of refuge in Paris, and found it, along with considerable literary success. He left his homeland for France in 1956, at the age of twenty-five, and by the mid-sixties he was an internationally acclaimed novelist. But quite unlike many of his compatriots he has not returned during these last years as Spain has, in its own eyes and in those of most observers, become a respectable and prosperous part of modern Europe. For most, Spain is nowadays a very far cry from the politically and socially repressive society that, after the triumph of the Fascists in the civil war of 1939, created a veritable diaspora of intellectual and liberal Spaniards abroad. Instead Goytisolo has hardened and defined his exile — and largely moved it from Paris to North Africa. There, among peoples and languages and vistas to which he is every day more tightly tied, with rich and deep bonds of ancient kinship, he has been articulating the exact

political and literary contours of this explicitly historical exile of his.

He is now a Morisco, he will tell you, directly and indirectly, to your face as well as in the sometimes hermetic writing that is the hallmark of his highly regarded fiction. Over the last twenty years or so much of his writing has been intimately involved with one aspect or another of Spain's profoundly contested Islamic heritage. The Moriscos, with whom Goytisolo so passionately associates himself, in his life at least as much as in his writing, were the persecuted and debased last Muslims of Spain. After 1492, the increasingly rag-tag remnants of what had once been a superbly productive community of Spaniards — not foreigners, as the unfortunate term "Moor" invariably suggests — was forced into an internal exile within their 700-year-long homeland. This was the exile of their forbidden faith since, despite the guarantees of religious freedom for Muslims that were a conspicuous part of the Agreements of Capitulation at the time of the surrender of Granada, they were unable to be Muslims except in secret. And along with their faith, strictly speaking, many of their cultural practices often continued only underground and occluded, and thus increasingly dim in their own memories and practices — supremely tragic and ironic among the results of this century-long repression was their increasing loss of Arabic and their increasing dependence on "aljamiado," their own Arabized form of Castilian written in the Arabic script.¹ Much like the many Jews who were suddenly no longer "Jews" (let alone "Spaniards") but "Conversos," after they converted in order to avoid their own forcible expulsion in that same fateful year of 1492, the "Moriscos" (or "little Moors") were the new community of forcibly converted Muslims.

For just over a century they more or less survived under extraordinarily harsh conditions — only to be finally, bitterly expelled just three years after the momentous publication, in 1605, of Spain's most enduring contribution to the canon of world literature, *Don Quixote*. In ways that are rarely discussed by those who speak and write about Cervantes, that most superb of novels and that most sophisticated of tributes to the complex powers of fiction is at the same time a poignant farewell to the Moriscos (who in fact are expelled during the years between the publication of Part I of the *Quixote* and Part II) as well as to everything in the

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medieval history of Spain that they represented. Goytisolo is a reader and a passionate lover of that Cervantes who is fully conscious of the political and human tragedies taking place and he very explicitly allies himself with Cervantes's "true author" in the *Quixote*, an "Arab historian" named Cidi Hamete Benengeli. And it is perhaps the ultimate tribute to Cervantes, and a powerful and authentic reading of the *Quixote* that Goytisolo is so passionately acting out now in his extraordinary engagement with the key character in that novel: the "translator" of Benengeli's Arabic masterpiece (a.k.a. the stories of the extraordinary adventures of Don Quixote de la Mancha) is a nameless Morisco found on the streets of the desolate Jewish quarter of Toledo, the Alcana, by Cervantes's narrator.

Juan Goytisolo, half a millennium later, has exiled himself from Spain not to find greater political and literary freedom, as he and others did during the Franco years, but instead as an act of explicit solidarity with that anonymous Toledan of Cervantes' imagination and with the countless Spaniards of historical reality, Jews and Muslims, or descendants of Jews and Muslims, who were expelled from their ancient and beloved homeland. And although he continues to take refuge from the worst of the summer heat of North Africa in his home in Paris, it is clear that it is now Marrakesh that is his true and permanent home. He has been learning Arabic over the years which he now speaks well. His adopted children are from North Africa and he has made them his heirs. Juan Goytisolo is in many ways the preeminent writer of contemporary Spanish letters in Europe, and because of his many decades as part of the French intellectual and writerly community, exceptionally well-known outside Spain itself. His life as a writer and as a public citizen, deeply committed to political engagement as a natural part of the writer's lot in life, is the self-conscious playing out of a long historical drama. In Marrakesh he is living out this *Quixote*-like story, where he is a character who has miraculously emerged out of the ashes of a destroyed medieval world, one that his own nation and his own people and his own culture refuse to understand as their own. His is a redemptive act: the Moriscos, when they were brutally expelled from their homeland — oh, unrequited love! — mostly found themselves in those same precincts of Marrakesh. And undoubtedly the children Goytisolo has adopted are their

descendants, if not literally then certainly in spirit, in Goytisolo's imagination. The story of Goytisolo is thus the extraordinarily Cervantine tale of a believer in the truly redemptive powers of fiction, and of a believer in the necessity of history.

Why North Africa? Why, one might ask with even greater puzzlement, should a writer of something many have called avant-garde or experimental fiction care so profoundly about a series of historical events in so remote a period of time? What other writers of the twentieth century, let alone the twenty-first, can we imagine living out their lives and shaping their body of work in order to redeem historical tragedies centuries removed from us, about which most people know very little or nothing? Just what does Juan Goytisolo, born in Barcelona in the twentieth century, imagine he can do about Spain's long-lost medieval past? And why? And why should anyone in the English-speaking world care about any of it? Amazingly, there are more or less rational answers to all of these questions, but we have to go to something like the beginning of the story to begin to understand. And the beginning of the story is not even in North Africa, where it will come around to something like its full circle when the Spanish Muslims are exiled there at the beginning of the seventeenth century, but considerably further east, and much further away in time.

In 750 an intrepid young man, the scion of the great ruling family of the Caliphs of Islam, abandoned his homeland. Damascus, capital of the suddenly vast empire of Islam in the middle of the eighth century, had become an abattoir for his family, those Umayyads who had first led the Muslims out of the Arabian peninsula barely a century before. Abd al-Rahman, grandson of the Caliph and sole survivor of the Abbasid massacre that followed their successful coup, set out across the vast expanse of the North African desert in search of a place of refuge. His flight westward, and this seeking of exile in North Africa, towards what was the farthest frontier of the Islamic territories, and of the world as anyone knew it, was not as arbitrary or as hopeless as it might seem at first glance. The prince's mother was a Berber tribeswoman from the environs of yesterday's Mauretania, today's Morocco, a place the expansive armies and settlers of the new Islam had reached some years before. It was from such places that the Arab conquerors had brought back women such as Abd al-Rahman's

mother, in some cases as brides or concubines for the highest-ranking families, to expand and enrich the bloodlines of the Arab descendants of the Prophet and his first followers.

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But when Abd al-Rahman finally reached that land of his maternal kinsmen, some five years after he had escaped from Syria, he found that many of them had themselves gone elsewhere, seeking a new homeland, although unlike him not out of the same sort of desperate political, life-or-death need but out of that adventurousness and sense of the better life beyond the next mountain pass or riverbend that seems to have driven men west time and again. So the Prince who was the last of the Syrian Umayyads followed their lead and their trail across the straits so narrow, there at that western edge of the world, that on a clear day one can imagine one sees the other side. What he found there, a stone's throw away, was a place already being called al-Andalus by this new emigré Muslim community, which, like Abd al-Rahman himself, was the product of the marriage of the Syrian Arabs, themselves descendants of those who had left Medina not too many generations before, and the Islamicized and only partly Arabized Berbers of old Mauretania. The centre of this rough and newly carved out frontier territory was an old Visigothic city that the former rulers had called Khordoba, in turn after the previous rulers' name, the Roman Corduba, now pronounced Qurtuba, and the old city sat on the banks of the Big Wadi. Today, still, in lightly touched up Arabic, which is what so many words in Spanish are, it is the Guadalquivir, or "Wadi al-Kabir," the river that winds down to that coast that practically kisses those North African shores.

So here what had been the Wild West when Abd al-Rahman had miraculously materialized ceased to be a hinterland from the moment he walked in, with all the swagger and self-possession of a young man born and bred to the Caliphate. And even though it would not be until two centuries later that one of his descendants actually openly declared that Cordoba was the seat of the Caliphate, al-Andalus was transformed, and nearly overnight was now anything but a mere provincial seat. On these long-ruined western shores of the Roman Empire's great inland sea, and at the front door of what was not yet really Europe, a real contender had arrived and settled in. And the course of many histories was

radically altered. Latin-Christian Europe, the poor cousin to the north, would eventually be transformed and revived by the Andalusians' intellectual and material prosperities. The ancient Iberian Jewish community, debased and enslaved by the Visigoths, would so flourish that it was a member of that community who served as the Vizier to the descendant of Abd al-Rahman who declared the Caliphate in 929. And Hasdai Ibn Shaprut was also, no less, the first in a line of poets of a newly invigorated Hebrew tradition, intimately tied to the Arabic poetic tradition the Jews knew as their own. Eventually, this period would be dubbed as the Golden Age of Jewish intellectual and artistic history, as good a testimony as any to a distinct and complex form of cultural hybrid vigour.

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Most of all, and most complexly of all, Abd al-Rahman, child of both East and West, political exile for the rest of his days, gave foundational shape and vision to what became an unique and eventually much-mourned Islamic civilization. In a superb scene in the movie *Lawrence of Arabia*, Prince Faisal (played by Alec Guinness) alludes to the lost grandeur of all of Arab civilization by evoking the memory of the "gardens of Cordoba." It is a line I cannot find in Lawrence's original text of the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* but which does indeed accurately represent the romantic and powerful memorialization of the gardens of Madinat al-Zahra, the palatine city built by the Caliph Abd al-Rahman III, along with the mosque of Cordoba, as the heights of cultural achievement — and the commensurate depths, for some, of tragic loss. Juan Goytisolo's writing and personal life are a form of intense mourning and yearning for the golden possibilities of that ancestral Spain of his, al-Andalus, and above all for the values of religious and cultural tolerance that the Andalusians practiced in imperfect and yet astonishing and admirable measure. And, no less, for the sparkling and vivacious social and aesthetic goods that followed from such tolerance, and that sometimes followed from the wonderful variety of peoples and languages and religions, even when intolerance was the official call of the day.

Goytisolo's profound investment in this all-too-unknown history of his homeland is in part an act of symbolic contrition and compensation for some five hundred years of terrible denial of this patrimony in Spain and in Hispanic culture. In part it is also an attempt to affirm a series of values that are embodied in that

history, especially when it is told as something other than a long "Reconquest," that distorted history of perpetual struggle between "Christians" and "Moors" that is the legacy of 1492. Most of all, perhaps, Goytisolo sees this mostly-misrepresented history as bearing profoundly on human and political affairs in our own times, and here a very small handful of examples must suffice. One of the distinguishing features of Islamic Spain is, ironically, the one most routinely denied, directly and indirectly, in the post-medieval recounting of it: there was no necessary correlation among ethnicity, religion and languages. Ethnically, the Muslims of al-Andalus were like their founding father Abd al-Rahman, that child of a Berber woman and an Arab father, except more so: his own children and his subjects, in every generation thereafter, included a huge admixture, a majority eventually, of that hodge-podge of indigenous people, Visigoths and Romans and others, who after the eighth century converted in astonishing numbers and with whom they were intermarried from the outset. At the same time, Arabic eventually became the *lingua franca* not only for Muslims but no less for Jews, and for a considerable number of Christians as well. Many of the cultural habits and accomplishments that arose within the Islamic community were lovingly and complexly adopted and adapted by the other communities, who for many centuries operated with the remarkably enlightened notion of the separability of Faith from other human behaviours.

The identity purists and police were around of course, and they came from all quarters: the Jews who claimed you could not be a good Jew if your Hebrew poetry smacked of Arabic; the Christians who were alarmed at the love of that same powerful Arabic poetry among the fashionable young people; the Muslims who claimed that the Andalusian habits of daily accommodation of Christians and Jews was a falling away from Muslim righteousness. But the truth is that for the better part of seven centuries, a very long time indeed, those voices were mostly drowned out, in practice, and their laments are powerful testimony to the rampant impurities and the conspicuous lack of monochrome or monocultural identities. Indeed, despite our preconceptions, a great deal of the destruction of civil societies and a great deal of the religious repression that took place came not because of any of the cartoonish Christians versus Moors crusading we imagine to define the period.

But (to name only the most conspicuous of examples) that spectacular palatine city of Madina al-Zahra, with its legendary gardens, was destroyed by rampaging Berber troops, with complex animosities towards the Caliphate. The relationship between Andalusian Muslims, who were the descendants of Berber immigrants but hundreds of years later as Andalusian as most of us in the New World are American, and the Berbers from North Africa, was often extremely antagonistic. From the late eleventh century through the middle of the thirteenth century two successive regimes of extremist Muslims, Almoravids and Almohads, made the former Caliphate into their colony and ruled it with what the Andalusians rightly considered a repressively iron fist. Goytisolo's belief in the need to remember that the history of Islamic Spain is a fundamental part of our common heritage is thus a very far cry from unfettered nostalgia or politically naïve romanticism. As his abundant and unstinting non-fiction writing on everything from Sarajevo to the immigrant "problem" in contemporary Europe reveals quite explicitly, Goytisolo understands that the long and winding history of al-Andalus is not remote or academic but rather uncannily familiar and surprisingly resonant for us in an age that includes, on the front page, all the same vital issues of both internicine as well as inter-faith intolerances. And that down the many forking paths of the 700 odd years of Andalusian history lie both brilliant and grim possibilities.

But do not go to Goytisolo's extensive literary oeuvre² expecting anything remotely "socialist" or "realist," or anything like the verbal equivalent of those stunning murals of the history of Mexico that so came to distinguish post-revolutionary Mexican art. Although his equally prolific essayistic writing is vigorously partisan and transparent in its views, as a writer of fiction Goytisolo is of a different party altogether. He is a member of that capacious Hispanic party of complex literary ideology and greatly varied styles whose most famous members include Cervantes himself and, in the twentieth century, the Latin American writers, those of the Boom and many of those who are his contemporaries or near-contemporaries, and perhaps especially Jorge Luis Borges. There are, of course, dozens of reasons other than those related to this question of the memory of medieval Spain for the special affinities we can detect among these writers. But this is also a tradition of writers whose camaraderie with and affection for the

Arabo-Islamic component of the Hispanic tradition is often visible and noteworthy. It has been expressed allusively at times, and tartly and subtly at other times, and principally in these writers' unflinching inclusion of the works of the Arabic tradition as part of their own canon, the canon they are willy-nilly passing on to their often unsuspecting (or willfully misinterpreting) readers.

Cervantes, to whom Goytisolo is most self-evidently attached, is certainly the ultimate master at this (although Borges comes close, but that would be the subject of a different essay) and the supreme ironist who walks off into literary history having the last laugh: the canonical heart of Hispanic letters cast with poignant tongue in cheek as the work of that Arab chronicler who is the "true author" of the *Quixote*, a work readable thanks only to the Morisco without whom the Arabic manuscript could not be deciphered by the narrator. These two characters, with their obvious call to consider the key literary questions of authority and authorship, are almost invariably described as the ultimate meta-literary conceits, those highly visible tokens of why *Don Quixote* has pride of place as a foundational work in that tradition of meditation on the powers of literature itself and the inspiration for everything that leads down the road to *Madame Bovary*, and beyond. But they are also the unambiguous markers of the vexed question of cultural identity that was the oppressive and inescapable question of the times — and that some would say is the oppressive and inescapable question of our own time, increasingly. Any number of the historical tragedies that marked turn of the seventeenth century Spain are movingly, at times sardonically, depicted by Cervantes, and to get a sense of his unparalleled blendings of bitterness and humor, literary self-reference laced with self-evident social and political consciousness, one need read little more than chapter five of the first book, the "Inquisition of the Books," when the village priest and barber, helped by Quixote's niece and housekeeper, burn his library because the books he was reading were the self-evident cause of his delusory madness. And among these tragedies the most inescapable, in the form of those central literary conceits of the novel, was the extraordinary fact that this place that had once been the beloved homeland of some of the most extraordinary lights of the Arabic tradition — from the great Sufi Ibn 'Arabi to the philosopher Ibn Rushd, known as Averroes in the Latin West, that so read and celebrated him, and the Jewish "second Moses"

Maimonides — had made the reading of its once-glorious language, Arabic, an act in effect punishable by death.

In the end, what is at stake for Goytisolo is not unlike what was at stake for Cervantes, and what is in different ways at stake for so many writers across historical time and space, and that is the vital question of memory and remembrance. As his two autobiographical volumes make explicit, for Goytisolo his personal memory is not separable from the cultural memory and consciousness of his land and his society and culture. He has become a Morisco and he is living out his life in exile in Marrakesh because that is what he senses he was and is, by all rights an inhabitant of that old and once lustrous part of his own tradition that was so unjustly exiled from the land and from the social fabric and from the cultural history of Spain. Many of the refugees from that attempted ethnic cleansing that began in 1492 and lasted throughout the seventeenth century, went west and ended up in the New World, and if we are true lovers and students of Cervantes, as Goytisolo is, we understand that they are the ancestors of the great Latin American writers of the Boom. And many others went east and found refuge in the Ottoman empire, especially so the shocked and permanently bereaved Jewish community, which to this day still speaks their maternal, fifteenth century Castilian, Ladino, and whose magnificent Hagadah was recently saved from the "Inquisition of the Books" that was the shelling of the Oriental Institute of Sarajevo. And the largely nameless Moriscos, who by the time of Cervantes, and by the time of their expulsion, could barely read and write Arabic anymore, they were Spanish exiles when they were packed off to North Africa, to those places just a stone's throw across the water, both strange and familiar, as they are for Juan Goytisolo.

Notes

- 1 This raises the possibility that what Cervantes more precisely means in that critical passage in chapter 9 is that the found manuscript of (as it turns out) the *Quixote* was written in aljamiado, i.e., a form of Romance, and not in Arabic — but that for the narrator, it all of course looked the same, written as it was in the Arabic script.
- 2 Goytisolo's outpouring of writing began in the early sixties, when he was living in Paris, but little of that is available in English and in any case that was before he had developed a sense of his literary-historical

mission vis à vis the Islamo-Arabic past. But from the late sixties and early seventies on his writing has been largely a reflection of those cultural-historical problems (and the titles are almost all explicitly a part of that world). Only a relatively small handful of these are available in English. Most prominent among these, as a visitor to the Amazon website will discover, is the trilogy that solidly announces his imaginative attachment to the historical question: *Señas de identidad*, 1966 (available as *Marks of Identity*); *Reivindicacion del conde don Julian*, 1970; and *Juan sin tierra* 1975 (*Juan the Landless*). (The translation of *Reivindicacion del conde don Julian* is called *Count Julian*, but this does not necessarily indicate that Goytisolo's title refers explicitly to the ancient Christian myth attributing the "loss of Spain" to a treacherous Visigothic Count named Julian, who gave ready access to the Muslim armies; I was astonished to see that the newest musical in London opening in the summer of 2000 was based on a garbled version of this mythological material.) Beyond that the following novels in translation are still in print: *Makbara*, 1980 (*Makbara*); *La cuarentena*, 1991 (*Quarantine*); and *Las virtudes del pájaro solitario*, 1988 (*The Virtues of the Solitary Bird*). Available in the UK are recent translations of his two supremely important autobiographical volumes, *Coto vedado*, 1985 (*Forbidden Territory*) and *En los reinos de Taifa*, 1986 (this latter is translated as *Realms of Strife* but the English fails altogether to capture the original's explicit allusion to the Taifa or "Party," as in "splinter party," Kingdoms of eleventh century Spain, the independent and culturally rivalrous and highly productive Islamic city-states that emerged after the fall of the Caliphate). Finally, due out in the fall of 2000 is a new title in English, *Marrakesh Tales*.

Those who can read Goytisolo's original Spanish of course have the fullest access to his abundant and varied writing, and especially to the extensive non-fiction part of his oeuvre, very little of which is translated. This includes a series of volumes, stylistically very varied, on places such as Istanbul, Sarajevo, Bosnia, Algeria and others. There are also a number of websites, all in Spanish, that have posted material on Goytisolo and/or have on them some of his copious outpouring of short pieces, mostly of a political nature. One of these appears to have been produced by his publisher and is advertised as his "personal" site, not likely literally true since Goytisolo himself still writes by hand, but extremely useful nonetheless.