

# My terror and pleasure

The last column written by Javier Marías, who died on September 11

**JAVIER MARÍAS**

**I**F THERE IS ONE ACTIVITY that I miss, it's translation. I abandoned it decades ago, apart from the occasional brief exception (a poem, a story, quotations from the French- and English-speaking writers who appear in my novels) and there's nothing to stop me returning to it, apart from my own writing and the fact that this essential work is still so appallingly badly paid; it is, after all, one of the world's most important jobs, and not just when it comes to literature, but also as regards the news we receive, the subtitling or dubbing of films and TV series - both of which tend to be either sloppy or downright dire - not to mention medical and scientific research, and conversations between politicians ... However, the translation I miss is the

literary kind to which I devoted almost all my efforts. I've always held that translation is so like writing that it's simply too exhausting to combine the two. The "only" difference is the presence of the original text, to which you must remain faithful - although never slavishly so. That original offers both advantages and disadvantages. One of the disadvantages is that you can never be completely, but only relatively, free, because you have to reproduce as best you can in your own language what Conrad or James, Proust or Flaubert, Bernhard or Rilke wrote in theirs, that is, you cannot invent. In a novel you can, of course, from first line to last, so much so that sometimes you don't know how to continue, and then you wish you had an original to guide you and tell you what

Javier Marías, 2017



you should write. The original text, like a musical score, is immovably there, even though the translator, like the pianist, has many decisions to make. Diction, choosing one word over another, tempo, rhythm, pauses, all these things are the translator's responsibility. It must be said, too, that a bad translator can ruin a masterpiece.

I often recall, with a mixture of terror and pleasure, the months and years I spent translating the four most difficult texts of my life: *The Mirror of the Sea*, written in the extraordinary but eccentric English of a Pole; *Tristram Shandy*, that eighteenth-century literary monument, which is no less labyrinthine than Joyce's over-rated *Ulysses*; *Religio Medici* and *Urn Burial* by Sir Thomas Browne, the seventeenth-century English sage who wrote in a prose that is, in equal parts, majestic, sublime and convoluted, and which enjoyed the unconditional admiration of both Borges and Bioy Casares. Initially I gave up on those last two texts, feeling that I just wasn't up to the task. Then, a few months later, I thought what a shame that Spanish readers should remain in ignorance of that work, and I returned to the fray with renewed vigour and finished the job. Why did it matter to me that those readers - of whom there would only ever be a few - should be able to read those works? I have no idea. I simply felt that these marvels deserved to exist in my own language, even if only for the enjoyment of those few curious readers.

Some translators do not live by translation alone - those who do, poor things, are obliged to take on all kinds of work, good, bad and indifferent, and to finish it at top speed. The fortunate few who do not feel a superfluous but selfless sense of duty towards their compatriots. Think only of the first translation of *Don Quijote*, made by the Dublin-born Thomas Shelton in 1612, only seven years after the book's publication in Spanish. What impelled that man to embark on the translation of a very long and far from easy Spanish novel by a complete unknown? I have no idea, but I imagine that what lay behind Shelton's generous impulse was a wish not to deprive English readers of the pleasure he had experienced when reading the book in its original language. The expression "a labour of love" is never more fitting than when applied to the work of such translators. After all, a writer always nurtures the hope, however remote, of selling hundreds of copies and becoming a success. No such glories await the translator, and a number of publishing houses still refuse to put the translator's name on the cover, as if Ali Smith and Zadie Smith couldn't stand the competition. And as for payment, it's enough to make you weep. How can they possibly pay the same fee for a new version of a Dickens novel as for the translation of a book by one of America's many current nonentities? Yet that is precisely what happens. Some Spanish publishers have made a fortune out of the work of a translator, whom they reward with a measly per-page rate and nothing more, while the book in question has sold hundreds of thousands of copies in that very translation. I know: a daughter might well care for her mother purely out of the love she bears her, but this doesn't mean that her devotion should go unrewarded, even if only so that she doesn't starve to death while she's unable to earn her living from some paid employment. From that point of view, I don't miss my years working as a translator. I've fared much better with my novels. Indeed, I've been immensely fortunate, a good fortune that has little to do with merit or talent. And yet, and yet ... I remember how pleasurable and how exciting it was to "rewrite" in my own language a text far superior to any I could have produced, as was the case with the translations mentioned above. Reading, editing and re-reading every page and thinking (doubtless mistakenly, for we are never the best judge of our own work): "Yes, yes, that is just how Conrad or Sterne or Browne would have put it had he written in Spanish". ■

Translated by Margaret Jull Costa

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Javier Marías, Spain's leading contemporary novelist, died shortly before the publication of this, his 939th column for El País. Margaret Jull Costa has been his main translator into English for thirty years

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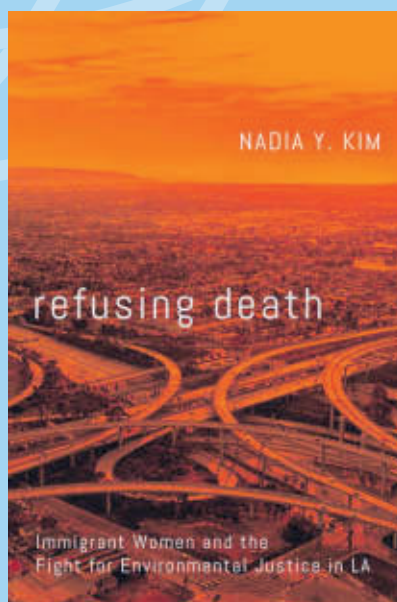
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