

Interview with Juan Goytisolo

Maria-Àngels Roque. Editor-in-Chief of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, Spain

For decades, the writer Juan Goytisolo has been promoting intercultural values and hybrid cultures in which we find recurrent elements, mainly Christian, Jewish and Muslim cultures. His literary words are today key references which have helped to organise specialised seminars worldwide. Moreover, his essays and positions are brave and show a great freedom of spirit faced with any kind of fundamentalism. Goytisolo acknowledges and values human pain and the injustices committed for centuries against those representing the cultures which are not prevailing. The interview we present is a conversation between the writer and the editor-in-chief of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* to commemorate the ten years of the journal.

Maria-Àngels Roque: We have had brief but intensive moments together; sometimes by chance, others as a result our Mediterranean affinities. I remember the first, almost twenty years ago, sitting next to each other after fortuitously bumping into each other on a plane from Barcelona to Casablanca. We also met in Barcelona, Marrakech and, last time, in Formentor (Majorca), places visited by figures who have given life to Mediterranean cultures. One of the most admirable things about talking to you is that, depending on what you are asked you say, like another great humanist, Don Julio Caro Baroja, “I already explained that somewhere else.”

Juan Goytisolo: Well, I am almost eighty, and I have written a lot.

M.-À.R.: Yes, but these types of interviews are more profitable for those who, although they are not yet very familiar with your work, are interested in the issues you deal with. These last ten years have not been very fertile

for Euro-Mediterranean relations. In the 1990s, it seemed as if we were achieving a more optimistic vision of what could be a plural, more unified, Mediterranean. However, the 2000s have represented an involution, beyond mutual ignorance, even an antagonism. I believe that Nicolas Sarkozy, through the launching of the Union for the Mediterranean, has taken away symbolic importance from civil society. In the 1990s there was more participatory will and more idea of plurality. Now it is as if the old conflicts of history have revived. For you, apart from the facts themselves, what are the roots and misunderstandings of this situation?

J.G.: What has happened since the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers is again the return of the language of confrontation, of crusade, of holy war against terrorism to justify, as George W. Bush did, the criminal invasion of Iraq, without providing any solution to the eternal failure of the Palestinian-Israeli dialogue. This was predictable. In the mid-1990s I already feared what was going to happen because I

witnessed the infamous siege of Sarajevo before the complicity of the UN forces, the UNPROFOR, and the internal politics favourable to Serbians of François Mitterrand and John Major. To this had to be added the eternal occupation of Palestine and the crushing of the Chechnya pro-independence movement. Thus, it is hard to imagine that this would not have had consequences. The horrible attack did not surprise me, although I could never imagine the extent of that monstrous event.

M.-À.R.: In an article of yours published in issue 10 of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* you said that, although the open debate on Islam in European countries of Muslim immigration was healthy, an Islamophia framed within what is politically correct was juxtaposed, with consequences difficult to foresee. Some years ago, you had already realised that the Arab world was hurt and offended.

J.G.: I saw in Sarajevo and in Chechnya the arrival of volunteers from different Muslim countries who went to help their unjustly pursued brothers, and once again they adopted radical positions and the Salafist credo. Also my trip to Algeria in the midst of the civil war showed me the disaster of certain Arab policies; in this case, that of ending the French language and seeking to impose classical Arabic. As a result, the level of French sank, the level of Arabic did not increase and the Egyptian teachers recruited in Saudi Arabia led to the Islamic Salvation Front and a war which caused 130,000 victims. This was the result of a policy contrary to all dialogue and to what I have always advocated: adding, adding and adding cultures and languages instead of literally eliminating them in the name of a pure identity.

M.-À.R.: Although in Morocco, perhaps because the Alaouite dynasty is intelligent and clever, it seems that the Berber issue is

prudently progressing, in Algeria the situation involves great violence.

J.G.: In my view, the recognition of the three languages (Riff, Tamazight and Tachelhit) by the Moroccan government is a very positive step; they are even used on TV. The problem is the fear of diversity and intercultural relation of those who advocate an exclusive Arab-Islamic identity.

M.-À.R.: Perhaps the policies of these states after independence have been a copy of those of France, which steam-rolled over the cultures of its territory because it believed that in this way it would have a stronger state.

J.G.: In the specific case of Algeria, French people left the best agriculture in Africa there, as well as an education system based on secular and republican values defended by some historical leaders of Algerian independence, which were swept away. The result has been a disaster. In Morocco, it is true, there have been partial improvements, but in the field of education I am seeing a backward movement, mainly in rural areas. There are schools where children only learn to memorise the Koran, and this is a sad reality.

M.-À.R.: Despite this, the Moroccan government argues that it is investing a lot of money in education.

J.G.: They are making an effort, but between what they say and what really happens there is a good distance.

M.-À.R.: Is this a problem of bad management or is there no exact vision of the needs of the country?

J.G.: There is always a dividing line between the ruling elites and most of the population. It



Juan Goytisolo (Miquel González).



Maria-Àngels Roque (Isabel Codina).

is not a case as dramatic as that of Algeria, but it is a serious situation.

M.-À.R.: Recent surveys in Morocco show that youths do not believe in political parties and, rather, are interested in the association movement. And associations are carrying out initiatives and development, education or gender equality projects.

J.G.: Civil society is very brave because it fulfils the shortcomings of an anachronistic education system.

M.-À.R.: Southern Mediterranean countries are major sources of emigration as were Spain and Italy in past decades. Another comparative element found between the two shores is the migration of birds; you have often used this simile to speak of emigrants. On the cover of *The Garden of Secrets*, you appear next to a stork and in this same work you have a very beautiful story of an emigrant who undergoes a metamorphosis, “The Stork Men”. You use the resource of metamorphoses

as an invention of desire and its possible realisation, although you call the main character a *transformer*.

J.G.: Yes, the stork on that cover was sick when it came to me, perhaps poisoned in a rubbish tip. The mayor of the neighbourhood where I live brought it to me because he had read that I followed the wisdom of storks: I went to Europe and returned to Morocco at the same time as them. When he brought it to me, I was not at home, but he left it with someone and I took care of it until it was able to fly. I gave it small hake. It did not let me touch it, but it finally got used to my presence. It was a very good experience.

M.-À.R.: In Islam, and I would also say in European popular culture, the bird is a metaphor of the soul. Personally, I began to be interested in storks at a symbolic level based on the field work I carried out in the eighties in an old area of seasonal migration in the Iberian Peninsula. Later, in Morocco, I entered a world where storks also share great symbolic richness.

Through them I understood the importance of hospitals in the Islamic world.

J.G.: In the early 19th century, Ali Bey was surprised that there were hospitals for storks in Morocco, such as Dar Bellarj. This place was restored by an extraordinary Swiss patron, Suzanne Biederman, whose recent death has been very sad for all those living in Marrakech.

M.-À.R.: When I was studying this issue, I realised that storks, when they were sick, went to the *mâristân*, which is the Moroccan name for *bîmâristân*, a Persian term which means hospital, especially psychiatric, in the Islamic world. These places were managed by important Sufi doctors. The first hospital was built in Baghdad in the 7th century by Harem-al-Rashid.

J.G.: Yes, in Konya (Turkey) there was a *mâristân* for mentally disturbed people, but they were not treated as sick people but rather cured with music, in a gardened environment. Abu Nasr al-Farabi, who was an excellent philosopher and musician, has a treatise on the benefits of music for the human spirit.

M.-À.R.: Rescuing the Sufi world, more harmonic with nature and culture, would also serve to improve intercultural dialogue. Your work on Saint John of the Cross, *The Virtues of the Solitary Bird*, is a treatise not only on the mystic but also on our days, on ourselves. If ideology, politics and religion, with their orthodoxies, distance us, would it not be more important to seek these spiritualities that connect humanity even more with the cosmic elements? How could it be done? It is not easy, but perhaps you, as a writer, could give us ideas.

J.G.: The uncontrolled modernity in which we are living is devastating everything. There are elements of a popular and Sufi spirituality

in different Arab countries that I studied some years ago. I am, of course, an agnostic person, but the highest forms of poetic spirituality and their popular expressions have always attracted me. Saint John of the Cross is the Spanish poet I like the most. His work, like that of Saint Teresa of Avila and Miguel de Molinos, reflects some mysterious affinities with Arab or Persian mystics such as Omar Ibn Al Farid, Ibn Arabi, Rabia al Adaiyya or Farid Din Attar.

M.-À.R.: For me, *The Conference of Birds*, by Din Attar, is one of the most beautiful spiritual poems that exists. In it, the birds begin a journey, a search for the Simorg, symbol of God in Persian mystical tradition, and when they arrive before it, they realise that the Simorg is themselves. Din Attar is telling us that we are the divinity, but we need that mystical transformation to see ourselves as such.

J.G.: I feel a great literary and personal admiration for the poetical expression of mysticism, although I insist that I am totally agnostic. But as a writer, I can only pay homage to the literary and moral beauty that such authors embody. I think it would be important for schools to teach these texts, bearing in mind that all the religious fundamentalisms have always been against, on the one hand, sciences, philosophy and medicine and, on the other, a poetic expression that escapes their control. This is repeated in Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

M.-À.R.: However, within these religious cultures we find anthropological values that are of great beauty. An example of this spirit is Ramon Llull, who wrote his works in Arabic, Latin and Catalan. 2007 saw the seven hundredth anniversary of his stay in Béjaïa (Algeria), and the IEMed organised an exhibition and various seminars in Algiers, Barcelona, Palma de Mallorca and Béjaïa, whose texts

have been published in issue 9 of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*. You wrote an essay about Ramon Llull.

J.G.: Yes, it is in *La rosa náutica* [The Compass Rose]. In 2004, I read almost all the works of Ramon Llull. I had a Catalan dictionary and, with great surprise, I discovered that I did not need it. Llull, apart from his genius, was the creator of the modern Catalan language. For me, it is equivalent to what Dante did in Italy. He created the Catalan language and it must be recognised. Latin was gradually becoming a dead language, and Arabic was the link of introduction of Greek, Assyrian and Middle Eastern philosophy and science in Spain.

M.-À.R.: Ramon Llull was called *Raimundus christianus arabicus*. His thought was influenced by the Sufism of Ibn Arabi or Ibn Sabin, and without doubt he knew the studies of the great Maghrebian mathematicians.

J.G.: In *La rosa náutica* I pointed out that a *pensée* by Pascal, *Qu'est-ce qu'il faisait Dieu avant la Création ?*, is already found in Llull: *Que feia Deu avans la Creació?* And I am not only thinking about him but Anselm Turmeda. The essay is dedicated exclusively to the influence of Arabic literature in Catalan literature.

M.-À.R.: In this decade Edward Said and the great Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish have left us. In *Andalusia's Journey*, Said recalls the diverse journeys he made to Andalusia and cites a poem by Darwish, a metaphorical poem of the successive losses that have taken place in history in which he also blames the cultural tear itself on the quarrels and the terrible jealousies between the Arab countries. Moreover, the article by Said summarises the theses of Américo Castro and you on the importance of the subject Muslims and converts in Spanish

society. They not only contributed Mudejar art, but this Mudejarism is a substantial part of the literature of the Spanish Golden Age.

J.G.: I was impressed by *Orientalism*, by Edward Said. My work *Crónicas sarracinas* [Saracen Chronicles] was, in a way, a complement to this work, as it concerned an aspect that Said had not approached, just as I mentioned to him personally when we were both university professors in the USA: the relation between Spain and Arab culture. *Orientalism* above all concerns the relation of the French and Anglo-Saxon cultures with Arab culture. Américo Castro has already said it, and I repeat it more firmly: the lack of curiosity for other cultures has always been a great shortcoming in Spanish culture. Now the situation is changing; in the last twenty years Arabists have emerged who specialise, for example, in the Dariya language of Morocco. But the reigning mentality until now in the Arabic studies departments has been to learn classical Arabic and consider that Arab culture does not exist after the 14th century. This lack of interest for the Arab world is a real problem. I have been reproached on numerous occasions for my interests in this world.

M.-À.R.: Why is it hard for us to recognise and value our hybrid Christian-Jewish-Muslim culture, why is it easier for us to accept the black legend, like victims of obscurantism, rather than defending those positive elements of the great literary creators?

J.G.: The Arab influence in *Poema de Mio Cid*; in *Tales of Count Lucanor*, which are adaptations of Arab stories; in many passages of Juan Ruiz, to say nothing of Ramon Llull or Anselm Turmeda, is undeniable, but is not recognised. There is a series of taboo fields in literary teaching in Spain that that is summarised very well by Francisco Márquez Villanueva, one of the great authorities of Spanish and Catalan

literature from the Middle Ages until the 17th century in Spain: in the first place, the origin of Arab influence in the first four centuries of the Spanish language; in the second place, the problem of the castes that for three centuries poisoned Spanish society and originated a series of creations unique in Europe as a response to this situation; finally, the exclusion of eroticism from our literary sphere. I taught the first course in the world on *Portrait of Lozana: The Lusty Andalusian Woman* at New York University and a colleague and compatriot reported me for teaching a pornographic course. That was in 1971.

M.-À.R.: Although there has been some *rara avis*, like those cited, that have spoken of our hybrid culture, normally it has been foreigners who have, with their studies, prompted our interest in them.

J.G.: When I made the television series *Alquibla*, there were countries I knew fairly well, but others not. Before going to these, I set about reading all the bibliography on the subject in the languages I know, and I found myself, for example, in the case of Iran, in rough figures, with 200 books written in English, 150 in French, 100 in German, 80 in Dutch, 40 in Swedish, 90 in Italian and nothing in Spanish. Nothing. Apart from *Narrative of the Embassy of Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo to the Court of Timour at Samarcand AD 1403-6* by Ruy González de Clavijo. In the case of Yemen I found something by Benjamín de Tudela, who travelled to this country to see how they lived there and even created various Yemeni dictionaries.

M.-À.R.: Also barely known is the case of father Pedro Páez in Abyssinia, who was the first European who arrived at the source of the Nile and wrote about it, and yet it is cited by foreign authors. When I prepared the study

on *La sociedad civil en Marruecos* [Civil Society in Morocco], I saw that to talk about the “Berber republics”, our own academics cited French colonial anthropologists, such as Robert Montaigne, overlooking people such as Joaquín Gatell, called Kaid Ismail, who wrote accounts of his strategic travels to Morocco during the 19th century.

J.G.: It is the problem of the homogeneous and fixed identities that do not want to admit this capacity to embrace the cultural variety that characterises them.

M.-À.R.: Sarajevo, Chechnya, Algeria... In an interview I recognised that the most important journeys of your life have been the two you made to Sarajevo. You said that the second trip formed the basis for your novel *Stage of Siege*. You said then that fiction was the only way of saying something new about what you had already published in the *Cuaderno de Sarajevo* [Sarajevo Essays]. Do you think that artists, filmmakers, writers are those that can best communicate complex situations in a more universal way, empathising with the people who know their works?

J.G.: I go to the cinema very little because here in Marrakech they hardly screen films, but I believe that it is an important way of showing this complexity we are discussing.

M.-À.R.: Your interest in Chechnya goes back to the readings of 19th century Russian authors, where the wars between Russia and the Chechens appear. Georges Charachidzé, a historian specialising in the Caucasus, explains that the Chechens were the old Gargarans who lived in the south of the territory. The Romans confronted the Gargarans in diverse deadly battles and, after one of these battles, discovered to their amazement that there were numerous armed women. They were the Amazons who

Herodotus talked about! The Chechens were polytheists and converted to Islam in the late 13th century; thus was born the synchronisation between the armed resistance to the Russians and the emergence of the Sufi movements. In another scenario we have the area of the Middle East, where in the 20th century some groups have been given a privileged position over others and we find hatred towards the difference of minorities, as in the case of Iraq, where the Sunnis produce the greatest mortality not among westerners but Shiites. The states gulp down diversity, plurality. Could we say that the conflicts also serve to make the millenary cultures that subsist maintaining their identity emerge?

J.G.: The situation in Chechnya is horrible. There have already been five wars of extermination and a collective expulsion of the Chechens to Siberia. I cannot think about this people without feeling suffering, for me it is a wound because I was there and I saw the savagery of the occupier. When I arrived, I knew the Russian literature of the 19th century well; works such as the caustic poem by Mijaíl Lérmotov in which he curses his country for having sent him to kill Chechens, or the impressive book by Tolstoy, *Haxi Murad*, which is a masterpiece. In terms of the "Amazon" women, there have always been female Chechen warriors; I saw them when I was there, in the part not dominated by the

Russians. On the conflict and the situation of the women, the film *Grozny, chronique d'une disparition* is one of the most beautiful I have seen in my life. We screened it a few years ago in the French Institute of Marrakech to show what is happening there.

M.-À.R.: And to finish, what recommendations would you give or suggest to youths, both Europeans and those of the Mediterranean countries, interested in writing or carrying out any kind of artistic activity, who want to communicate to transcend the limits of their culture, their family, their nation?

J.G.: You have to add languages, cultures, experiences. This is the only piece of advice I can give. Gaudí said that you always had to add, and he was absolutely right. The superior civilisation will be that which can add diversity and assimilate other cultures.

M.-À.R.: And do you think that today in the Mediterranean, even though it has all the elements to develop this sum of cultures, it is going through a bad time?

J.G.: Indeed. The new European regulation of expulsion of immigrants seems a disturbing backward movement, and we see each time that xenophobic and demagogic policies against gypsies, people of Muslim origin, etc, are becoming more noticeable. Bad times are coming.