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José Saramago as a Transiberianist Cultural Translator

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Abstract Saramago's life and work can be approached from a translational perspective. The numerous texts and interviews in which Saramago reflected on intra- and extra-Iberian relations allow us to analyse him today as a cultural translator. I will argue that Saramago translated Luso and Spanish ethnocentrism into three key ideas. Firstly, the multicultural character of the Iberian Peninsula. Secondly, that Iberian cultures would share a common basis that differentiates them, in turn, from Europe. And thirdly the idea of transibericity as dialogue with the alternative doxa that today include Latin American and African post-colonial cultures.

Keywords José Saramago. Walter Benjamin. Philosophy of translation. Cultural translation. Transiberism. Transibericity.

Summary 1 On Saramago as a translator. – 2 Saramago and the philosophy of translation. – 3 Saramago as a transiberianist cultural translator. – 4 Conclusion.

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There are many aspects of the life and work of José Saramago (1922-2010) that might be approached from the perspective of Translation Studies, although as of yet there is little critical literature on the topic. This study aims to help fill this gap. I want to note, on the one hand, Saramago's thought about translation in the widest sense and, on the other, propose an analysis of transiberianism from the perspective of cultural translation. I would like to highlight the importance of Saramago's transiberianism as a transversal thinking through the nationalities of Iberian origin, whether this is in a European or an intercontinental context, drawing out its relevance for current political and sociocultural debates.[1]

1 On Saramago As a Translator

In order to contextualize Saramago's understanding of translation, it is useful to begin with a short description of his experience as a translator in the narrow sense of the term. Saramago began his career as a professional translator in 1955, during the Salazar dictatorship, out of economic necessity, and he only ceased this activity in 1984. According to my most recent count, Saramago translated 62 works, many of which are still being republished.[2] These are works that were translated principally in the 1970s, for important Portuguese publishers such as Moraes (15), Estúdios Cor (13), Estampa (16), Caminho (5) or Europa-América (9). Among these there was a notable number of novels and stories, although non-fictional genres count for more than 60% of the total, whether these are collections of political and sociological essays (22), history books (6), biographies (3), works of philosophy (4) or psychology (2). Saramago translated almost exclusively from French, and there is only one case in which we could assume a translation from Spanish.[3] In many cases, these are indirect

1 I will not enter into debates relating to transiberianism that I have already dealt with in previous studies (2014, 2017, 2020) or in others that are currently in press (forthcoming).

2 Horácio Costa composed an initial list of Saramago's translations in 1997, followed by another by Jorge Santos (1998) and the complementary indications that have appeared on the José Saramago Foundation's webpage in recent years. Still divergent and incomplete, these three listings have recently been revised, analysed and updated by Rodrigo Lage (2022), to whose count my own revision now adds another translation (summing up 62). I thank the José Saramago Foundation for allowing and helping me to peruse the Saramago's translations that are held in his personal library between April and June 2022.

3 It is the *História da Espanha* written by Fernando Díaz Plaja in 1970 (Lisboa: Círculo de Leitores). The source text could have been *Otra Historia de España* published in Barcelona by Plaza & Janés in 1972 (at least, the Bibliothèque Nationale Française lists no French translations of this author).

translations, if we think of his translations of German authors such as Hans Hellmut Kirst and Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, or of Russian and Bulgarian authors such as Tolstoy, Moskvichov, Pramov, or Jivkov, whom Saramago could only have translated working from the French versions of their works. In total, and over 29 years, Saramago translated 26 works of fiction and 36 of non-fiction, all principally of Francophone origin. We are speaking, then, of a long and wide experience in a profession that requires minute attention to detail as well as a profound immersion in the source text and culture, a profession that did not bring public recognition, given that the role of the translator was even more invisible than it is today. Being a translator was an important part of a long period of training that allowed him to write his greatest novels. The study of how the practice of translation inflects Saramago's novels is still in its infancy, but Saramago himself often pointed out his fascination with working with texts by authors such as Colette, André Bonnard, or Georges Duby. In 1989, in an interview with José Carlos Vasconcelos, he revealed the importance the translation of Duby's work had for his own understanding of the relationship between history and fiction:[4]

> I translated works by Georges Duby, one of which was *The Age of the Cathedrals,* which I found fascinating. From his work I began to understand the difficulty of distinguishing that which we call fiction from that which we call history. The conclusion, right or wrong, to which I arrived, was that history is indeed a fiction. A selection of facts organized in such a way as to make a coherent past, history also involves the making of fiction.[5] (in Gómez Aguilera 2010, 164)

But it is also important to point out that Saramago translated, after the Carnation Revolution, works by African authors of immense political significance in the post-colonial context. He translated the Senegalese author Ousmane Sembène's *L'Harmattan* (*O Harmatão*, 1983), as well as the future Cameroonian Minister of Culture Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie de boy* (*Uma vida de boy*, 1981), both of which were published by the Caminho publishing house. This final work has been the object of critical study by Ana Paula Ferreira, who shows how *Uma vida de boy* brings the "process of coming to political conscience through the language of the European colonizer" (2014, 83) to Portuguese, a translation strategy that can be understood in terms of postcolonial theory. This pioneering study on Saramago's translations

4 On the importance of Duby for Saramago's thoughts on history as well as for an analysis of Saramago's translation of Duby's *Le temps des cathédrales*, see Caravela 2021.

5 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the Author.

from a cultural studies' perspective[6] also contains, unless I am mistaken, the first application of Walter Benjamin's ideas on translation, as well as Lawrence Venuti's more recent work on domestication and foreignization, to Saramago's practice as a translator.[7]

2 Saramago and the Philosophy of Translation

To sum up what Saramago thought about translation, in general and more specific terms, the best point of departure might be his opening speech at the IV Latin American Congress of Translation and Interpretation, in Buenos Aires, when the author argued that "everything is a translation", and that "we are all translators" (2003, n.p.), adding:

> Inside each one of us there is a kind of ocean of words, something that we can't fully understand and which borders on the ineffable, if that's what we want to call that which we can't communicate, but which we know resides within us. Trying to express what goes on in our interior is not, in my understanding, anything other than translation. Perhaps I am the first writer who admits that what he is doing is translation, given that, ultimately, what we do is to put out thoughts and feelings in intelligible formulas that belong to conventional codes of communication. (Saramago 2003, n.p.)

Saramago touches on something here that today might be considered common-sensical – that translations not only have to do with interlinguistic relations, but also influence both source and target cultures. While for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries translation was mostly considered a national question, from the end of the twentieth century its cultural, transnational, and trans-social value has been increasingly recognized. If we want to more precisely define Saramago's argument, we might say that all experience is, in a sense, translation, as is the construction of a sense of self derived from an idea of cultural community, an imagined community that is itself the result of processes of translation.[8] I doubt that Saramago

6 The first study of a relationship between Saramago's translations and the question of intertextuality (in the case of Pär Lagerquist's *A Sibila*, Estúdios Cor 1959), although very brief, is by Leal 1999. Intertextual issues and from a cultural studies perspective were dealt with more in depth by Grossegesse (2015 and 2020), namely in relation to Saramago's translation of Erich Maria Remarque (*A centelha da vida*, Europa-América 1955) and the translation into German of *História do Cerco de Lisboa*.

7 Later, Gonçalves 2019 also focused on this issue in her analysis of Saramago's translations of Maupassant (she is currently doing her PhD on Saramago as a translator).

8 What Saramago understands as translation can be related to the notion of double translation/paratranslation that I have described on various occasions: "Translation is a

is the first writer to compare his profession with that of a translator, given that already Walter Benjamin placed translation "at the deepest level of linguistic theory, for it is much too far-reaching and powerful to be treated in any way as an afterthought" (2002, 69). And it is important to point out the similarities between Saramago's understanding of translation and that of the German thinker, who, as far as I know, does not feature in the Noble Prize winner's writings. Beyond the now standard question of the relationship between the translatable and the untranslatable, Saramago also mentions in this conference the well-known distinction that Benjamin draws between the "way of meaning" and "what is meant" (2002, 257):

> But let us move from the transcendent to simpler things: what in Spanish is called *calle* for us Portuguese is *rua*. Italians say *via*, Germans say *[S]tra[ß]e*, the English, *street*, and here everything seems clear, we just move from one word to another. If in the original work *rua* appears, then my Spanish translator, Pilar, who is sitting beside me, will without hesitation put the word *calle*. And yet, a *rua* is not the same as a *calle*. (Saramago 2003; italics added)

In his famous essay, "The Task of the Translator" (2002), published in 1923, Benjamin employed the words "Brot" in German and "pain" in French to illustrate the fact that in terms of "ways of meaning", there are no exact equivalences between languages. As Saramago argues indirectly, so Benjamin pointed to how the cultural context (and that of paratranslation in general terms) conditions our understandings and imaginaries, inflecting the ways in which we translate the real.

Saramago's Buenos Aires text constitutes something of a summary of his translation ideology. It is probable that he was aware of contemporary research in translation, something reflected in his comments that it was necessary "to rid of the idea of a subaltern task, that the translator is simply a cable linking one language to another" (2003, n.p.). He was also extremely prescient when he suggested the necessity of studying "another type of translation that does not have a direct relation with the profession, but one that translators help us understand. I refer here to political discourse' (2003, n.p.). In a most original manner, Saramago also relates the question of political discourse understood as translation with the notion of untranslatability, with the "impossibility of translation, because how can one move from one discourse to another written

constantly moving transposition process without a fixed location and, in a wider sense of the term, it is a form of transcultural knowledge. An open and almost 'holistic' concept of translation includes all of its contexts and conditions, that is to say, what one might refer to as 'paratranslation'. Translation and paratranslation form an interdisciplinary space where not only deculturisation and vulgarisation, but also resistance, cross-breeding and hybridisation are carried out constantly and at an increasingly global level" (Baltrusch 2010, 115).

in the same language but which says what the first does not say?" (2003, n.p.). Although indirectly, Saramago refers here to the fact that untranslatability often arises when there are profound cultural and contextual differences between languages. But also, when political actors may use language that is deliberately ambiguous or loaded with ideological or emotional undertones that are difficult to capture in translation, especially when they serve as a form of propaganda or manipulation.

Another fundamental document that allows us to approach Saramago's understanding of translation is a draft of a talk to be given to the VIII Congress of Spanish Writers in 2008. For health reasons, Saramago was unable to take up the invitation to speak at the congress, but his text, whose ideas were intimately related to those of the Buenos Aires conference, were read out by the writer Andrés Sorel, and later published in *O Caderno 2* (2009). Here, Saramago again takes up the theme of the similarity between literary writing and translation:

> To write is to translate. It always will be. Even when we are using our own language. We convey what we see and what we feel (supposing that seeing and feeling […] are something more than words […]) in a conventional system of signs, writing, and we are at the mercy of circumstances and the vagaries of communication in transmitting to the reader, not the entirety of the experience we wanted to convey […], but at least the shadow of that which in the depth of our hearts we knew was untranslatable – the pure emotion of an encounter, the amazement of discovery, that fleeting silence before the word that will remain in our memory like the trace of a dream that time will never fully extinguish. (2009, 151-2)

Again, what Saramago proposes is similar to Walter Benjamin's theory of translation. According to Benjamin, human language is already a translation of the language of things, of what he calls the "mute magic of nature" (Benjamin 2002, 69), or what Saramago reformulates as "that fleeting silence before the word that will remain in our memory". The movement of language in translation was conceived by the German philosopher as a kind of negotiation between translatability and untranslatability. This meant seeing human language less as a representation of the real, but more as a translation of its meanings in constant dissemination. In order to explain the ever-present human impulse to translate, to always translate ourselves to ourselves, despite all difficulties, Benjamin proposes the strategically essentialist concept of a "pure language", an unreachable ideal for all translation practices, but one that serves as orientation (cf. Baltrusch 2018). In the words of Saramago, who in this respect seems to be in agreement with Benjamin, this would be the "trace of a dream that time will never completely extinguish" (2009, 151-2). Saramago also argued, again in a curious proximity to the work of the German thinker, that the original itself should

be understood as a translation, that is, as a "determined perception of a social, historical, ideological and cultural reality", "embodied […] in a linguistic and semantic web" (2009, 152). This is an insight that seems at odds with the supposed role of the translator, who is required to immerse themselves in the source text. Saramago attempts to resolve this dilemma by positing a "translation-text" that would always complete an initial "text-translation", so that the practice of translation would be an encounter between two collective cultures who should engage in a mutual and respectful recognition:

The original text is one of the possible "translations" of the author's experience, and the translator has the obligation to convert this "text-translation" into a "translation-text, a process that is inevitably ambivalent, as after the initial capturing of reality in the "text-translation", the translator undertakes the work of conveying this reality intact to a different linguistic and semantic context, respecting, simultaneously, the place from which it came and the place to which it is headed (2009, 152-3).

Saramago's "text-translation" is, then, directed towards an Other who will have to translate it so as to make it a "translation-text", implying a utopian "other-place that does not exist or that could be characterized, in philosophical terms, as post-colonial" (Ferreira 2014, 75). This can also be understood in a more general sense, in that our subjectivities are colonized by conventions and ideologies.

But this post-colonial understanding of translation in Saramago's work could be interpreted historically, as a reaction to the long history of Portuguese and Spanish colonial domination in the Americas and Africa. Saramago unequivocally underscored his postcolonial perspective in his Nobel Prize speech, where he put forth a compelling vision for a more ethically conscious Europe. And in the realm of literature, he had already laid the groundwork for his postcolonial stance in his novel *A Jangada de Pedra* (The Stone Raft, 1989; see also Baltrusch 2017)). A critical vision of history comes to be fundamental in the definition of Saramago's thought on translation, but also key here is the necessity of establishing a dialogue between author and translator in the context of mutual and transcultural recognition:

> For the translator, the silence before the word is, then, a threshold towards an 'alchemical' process, in which it is necessary to change into something else in order to remain the same. The dialogue between author and translation, in the relationship between the text *that is* and the text *to be*, is, above all, a meeting between two collective cultures that should recognize each other. (2009, 153)

When Saramago describes, poetically, translation as an "alchemical" movement that approaches the silence before the word, he evokes, perhaps unknowingly, Benjamin's notion of the ideal transparency of

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translation in relation to the original. This idea of "*continuing to be* that which it had been" is a metaphorical version of the German philosopher's defence of the idea that translation should reveal the (unreachable) ideal of a "pure language" in the original, through which is revealed a "suprahistorical kinship" between language and the utopia of the "totality of their intentions supplementing one another" (Benjamin 2004, 257).

In this way, Saramago's reflections on translation allow us to analyse his work and thought not only in terms of translation in general terms, but also as a culturally specific translation theory and practice, even in relation to his literary and biographical trajectory. Moreover, Saramago had always been searching for answers that could help humanity overcome a capitalist-neocolonial world order. However, Saramago's philosophical thought has also been guided by Marxist praxis and ontology,[9] although it is arguable that he shared Marx's postulate of the existence of a teleological element in the human condition. I think it appropriate to interpret Saramago's "weak" utopia as an experiential critique rooted in social and communitarian relations, as a "concrete utopia" in the sense of Ernst Bloch, who also suggested that concrete utopian thought did not coincide "with a dreamlike abstract utopia, nor is it driven by the immaturity of a merely abstract utopian socialism" (1986, 146). Thus, Saramago's transiberism could be seen as a translation of Marxist anti-utopian thought. In an interview in the context of the World Social Forum in Brazil in 2005, Saramago insisted on the need to translate the utopia of the "non-place", of hope always deferred to a distant future, into what he called "continuous action" and declared to be "my utopia" (2005, n.p.).

3 Saramago As a Transiberianist Cultural Translator

To this we might add his well-known, persistent, and very political attempt to defend the reciprocal comprehension between the distinct cultures of the Iberian Peninsula. This is not only so that each peninsular culture might be understood by the others, but also so that they might translate each other and be heard in an ever-more globalized context, one that today implies the establishment of a dialogue among

9 In general terms, Saramago's thinking continues along the lines of the Marxist critique that utopias are mere constructions that distract us from the historical growth of power relations, and in which political attitudes end up being disconnected from basic socio-economic conditions. Consequently, utopias were seen by Marx and Engels as systemic formations based exclusively on theories that fail to recognise the revolutionary side of human misery in contemporary history. Saramago's thought can be considered close to Engels' "scientific socialism" who defines it, in contrast to so-called utopian socialism, as a procedural and dialectical (contradictorily propulsive), but always necessary development from a concrete historical situation (cf. Engels 1973).

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equals with the post-colonial Latin American and African cultures. His move to Lanzarote, as a result of the first case of political censorship after the 25th of April Revolution in Portugal, the censoring of his *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, can be interpreted as the very personal affirmation of political-cultural translation. Despite the fact that Saramago always showed scepticism with regard to the historical concept of utopia, he pursued a very concrete utopia in his vision of an intra- and transiberian solidarity.[10] In this way, Saramago's transiberianism places at its centre distinct cultural identities and, implicitly, the need for that which I will define as cultural translation.

Benjamin created a significant philosophical basis from which to think cultural translation as a task that consists not only in transporting, but also in transforming, in the sense of defining the positioning of a cultural phenomenon in the target culture. This is a transitory process and one that depends upon an irremediably subjective interpretation. However, this cultural translation, which Gayatri Spivak considers the normal state of culture (2008), creates always new originals (cf. Bassnett 2003, 15). It is in this sense that I interpret Saramago's notion of *trans-ibericidade* (transibericity), a term the author coined around the time of the publication of *The Stone Raft* (originally published as *Jangada de Pedra* in 1986). It was only later, and as a result of the influence of Spanish translations of his work, that Saramago would speak of *transiberismo* (transiberianism). This was an attempt to adapt the historic ethnocentrisms of the Spanish and Portuguese worlds for a cultural philosophy that I see as characterized by three key ideas. The first consists in the complete acceptance of the multicultural character of the Iberian Peninsula as an undeniable historical fact. Saramago returns here to a line of argument that had as one key moments in 1927, when the Catalan Nationalist Francesc Cambó advanced the concept of the *hecho diferencial* (fact of difference) to describe the incapacity of the Spanish centralizing state to subjugate the peripheral Iberian cultures:

> And with this obsession with exterminating the fundamental fact of difference, and reducing all the territories under the sovereignty of the Spanish Crown to the image and likeness of a homogenous power, Spain has lost one after another of those territories, because the reality of difference is stronger than any Power, and before it, the most powerful State is as impotent as the desert

10 Cf. also Baltrusch 2014. Saramago searched for answers that could lead human life beyond colonial capitalist society. But his thought was always praxis-oriented and aiming at an experiential critique rooted in social and communal relations, at a "concrete utopia" in the sense of Ernst Bloch, who also suggested that concrete utopian thought "by no means coincides with abstract utopia dreaminess, nor is directed by the immaturity of merely abstract utopian socialism" (1986, 146).

> Bedouin who seeks to destroy the mountains and cities that he sees as an offence against his accustomed vistas of infinite horizons and his nomadic life among the endless plains. (1927, 3)

Saramago's transibericity contemporizes and universalizes Cambó's thought because, beyond their fundamental pluricultural nature, the Iberian cultures have a common basis that differentiates them from the rest of Europe. This can be seen in *The Stone Raft,* where the characters, although coming from clearly distinguished geocultural backgrounds, form a cohesive group with a common vision. But this common perspective is very different to that of a Europe that, shocked by the breaking free of the Iberian Peninsula, bursts into singing that "We are also Iberians!" (Saramago 1988, 84), due to the fact that they also must now orient themselves towards the Global South. This (necessary) distinction in a Europe where there is no longer a common basis between the cultures of the centre/north and those of the south (cf. Baltrusch 2017) constitutes transiberianism's second key idea. The third is the already mentioned "task of translating, respecting, simultaneously, the place from which we came and the place to where we are headed" (Saramago 2009, 152-3), especially in relation to the colonial histories of Spain and Portugal. That is, the necessity of entering into a constructive dialogue with the Global South, or, in other words, with alternative *doxas* (often decolonial) that Latin American and African cultures offer us today. It is in this sense that *The Stone Raft* is perhaps the most unequivocal expression of what Saramago understood by Iberianism and transibericity, as he makes clear in an interview with Juan Domínguez Lasierra, in 2001:

> That "stone raft" is a metaphor that attempts to express an idea: that of transiberianism, which is not the Iberianism of the nineteenth century, or even the twentieth century […]. I am not speaking about a union, but about unity, Iberian unity, which we should bring with us on that "stone raft" as a starting point for dialogue and encounter. (in Gómez Aguilera 2010, 255)

On the one hand, Saramago's attitude evokes the "intentions supplementing one another" of which Benjamin spoke, one of the many parallels that can be traced between transiberianism and the "pure language" as a dynamic of transversality between language, culture, and history. On the other, his transiberianism emerges here as an ethical and aesthetic process that is made apparent in the continued practice of cultural translation.

Apart from his fiction, Saramago also left us many texts and interviews in which he reflects on inter- and extra-Iberian relations, not in the sense of an Iberian union, but, as in the interview just cited, as a kind of unity in dialogue. It would be to stray away from the topic at

hand for me to attempt to contextualize Saramago's ideas within the complex history of Iberianism, but it is important to note that Iberianism has always served as a platform for many interliterary and intercultural contacts within the Peninsula (cf. Casas 2003, 81). Already in 1990, César Antonio Molina referred to Saramago as "the only Peninsular writer who understood himself as the 'first' Iberian writer" (288). And it is in the prologue to this well-known work by Molina that Saramago declared the death of historical Iberianism, while at the same time its necessity in allowing us to think of the present and the future: "Is Iberianism dead? Yes. Can we live without it? I do not think so" (Saramago 1990, 4). Beyond the polemical question of Iberianism, there is a more or less hidden debate in Portugal, but also in Galicia, about the appropriation of the figure and work of Saramago in Spanish culture. These are understandable concerns, as translation never occurs in a neutral context or in conditions of absolute equality. In this context, Torres reminds us that "'Iberian writer' [...] is the description used since time immemorial by some within Spain when they want to absorb a successful Portuguese writer and convert him or her into an aspiring Spanish one" (1999, 469-70). In any case, as a cultural translator Saramago had by 1994 proposed an overcoming of "traditional Iberianism"[11] and the idea of a common "spiritual space" as imagined by the great Miguel Torga (1990, 133).[12] Saramago's transibericity lacks this spiritual element, and we might say that it represents a moment of transition, or even of rupture, that transforms the old Iberianism into a much more concrete utopianism. Saramago's concrete utopianism centres, for example, on debates regarding the peripheral nationalisms of the Peninsula and their problematic relationship with the Spanish state, the European Union, globalization, etc. Nevertheless, Saramago's ideas do not entirely escape the legacies of the past, a fact that inflects how we can understand his own contribution to these debates. Orlando Grossegesse's 2005 statement in this regard continues to be valid:

> Today it is difficult to undertake a distanced analysis of the relationship between literary, academic, and political life, that is, the complex 'dialogue' between a writer and the multiple political, media, and philological discourses that inspire both controversial

11 Cf. Saramago 1994 (in Sáez Delgado 2020, 58): "Transiberianism would be a surpassing of traditional Iberianism that would include the traditionally Iberian countries in Latin America and Africa. And, if adopted by intellectuals and politicians, would become the great innovation of an epoch: but for that we would need to have a unique and decisive historical vision".

12 The innovation to which Saramago subjects "traditional Iberianism", and its transformation in transiberianism, is a form of translation that could also be understood in terms of the anthropophagic translation theory of Haroldo de Campos.

> rejection and euphoric consecration of a Portuguese, Iberian, European, and worldwide 'José Saramago'. (183)

In this context, one of the fundamental elements to take into account in any analysis of the dialogue between Saramago and "political, media, and philological discourses" – whether these are analyses that are distanced, polemical, or celebratory – is his transiberianism. It is obvious that his literary work and his activism transcend many frontiers, something that predisposes them to an analysis from a cultural translation perspective.

Cultural translation as a form of mediation and negotiation always implies an attempt to conserve and explain elements of the source culture in the target culture. From the pioneering work of Susan Bassnett, André Lefevere, Tejaswini Niranjana and Harish Trivedi to the more recent contributions from Judith Butler or Gayatri Spivak, the debate over cultural translation, as well as the very concept of *cultural translation* and its complicated relationship with Cultural Studies, have undergone constant revision and diversification. In a general sense, the phrase 'cultural translation' is today used in Translation Studies in order to think through the negotiation of hierarchical difference, a question that could be thought of separately from linguistic politics (cf. Bhabha 1994). This seems to be an aspect of cultural translation that might be related to Saramago's reflections on the hierarchical and unequal relations between dominant and colonizing cultures (in this case the Spanish and Portuguese) and minoritized cultures, both within the Iberian Peninsula and the Latin American and African context. As presupposed by Saramago's concept of "text-translation", historical colonialism and transnational capitalism provoked contact between different lifestyles and worldviews, a process that not only destabilized cultural identities, but also the insecurity with respect to them (cf. Eagleton 2003). In his public positionings, Saramago always showed a clear understanding that hybridity was one of the conditions that make cultural translation viable (cf. Bhabha 1994). Globalization itself encourages processes of hybridization, and Saramago's own work is an example of this tendency, especially if we consider the, at times intentional, influence of Spanish on his writing in Portuguese (cf. Venâncio 2014).

But the negotiation between cultures that Saramago promoted in his writing and in his activism is also visible in his numerous trips taken from the 1980s to close to the year of his death in 2010, both throughout Europe and throughout America. Saramago's role as a cultural translator was always apparent in these travels, and he always highlighted questions such as migration, social-political change and resistance, the reinscription of the past in the present, and vice-versa. Notably, the majority of his interventions centre around advocating for the significance of intermediate areas, such as his support for

the Zapatista movement in Chiapas. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) famously argued that these *in-between* spaces are one of the principal characteristics of post-colonial societies. The Iberian Peninsula is also characterized by places and events that might be defined as *in-between*, something that can be seen in the bilingual nature of many of its communities, their literary and musical cultures, or in the multiple forms of interlinguistic and intersemiotic translation that have intensified since the middle of the twentieth century. In this regard, Saramago commented in an interview given to the *ABC* newspaper in 2001 that "[the] Iberian mosaic needs a constant and circular relation between the cultures of which it is composed" (in Cabero Diéguez 2004, 15).

In this context, the concept of hybridity is useful for describing the dynamic of the narrative voices, the heteroglossia, and the divergent subjectivities that are visible in Saramago's writing. But the argument could also be made that hybridity is an element that characterizes the performativity of Saramago's role as a political-cultural translator who intervened, both in Spanish and in Portuguese, in innumerable events inside and outside the Iberian Peninsula (as in the World Social Forum or in Chiapas), and who always made sure to emphasize both cultural difference as well as the historical and human foundations that unite. In an elaboration of Walter Benjamin's arguments in "The Task of the Translator", we might say that Saramago tried to emphasize "the performativity of translation as the staging of cultural difference" (Bhabha 1994, 227). However, it is in Tomislav Longinović's "Manifesto of Cultural Translation" that we can find a definition of cultural translation that adapts even better to Saramago's complex intertwining of concrete utopianism and cultural translation: "The activity of cultural translators is not confined to the emergent field of academic study devoted to the cultural 'in-between', but always involves a performative theory of everyday life for the different locations of particular linguistic communities" (2002, 5). Saramago as activist was very conscious of the importance of performance in public space, whether as a mediator or cultural translator in his travels in Chiapas, or in his literary work, with the creation of protagonists, individual or plural, capable of representing wide networks of meaning and affect, as in *The Stone Raft*.

It can be argued that there are three major themes in Saramago's thought on trans/Iberian culture: the power of the state (with centralizing tendencies both in Portugal and in Spain, as well as in many countries in Latin America); nationalism (with the power imbalances between the Portuguese and Spanish nationalisms, once colonizing powers and still dominant today, and the nationalisms of the other, minoritized cultures of the Peninsula);[13] and, thirdly, the cultural

13 Writing from his exile in Argentina in 1948, the Galician artist, writer and politician Alfonso Castelao observed in *Sempre en Galiza* that "[t]he Basque Country was a

identities that are not linked to a state or a nationality,[14] an aspect that is even more complex when applied to the entirety of Spanish and Portuguese speaking communities. Any analysis of the complex trans/Iberian web needs to take into account these three basic coordinates. In an interview on the occasion of the aforementioned conference in Buenos Aires in 2003, Saramago suggested, indirectly, that translation could help overcome difficulties relating to these three elements: "Writers make national literatures and translators make universal literature. Without translators, we writers would be nothing, we would be condemned to imprisonment in our own languages" (2003, n.p.).

4 Conclusion

Broadly speaking, Saramago's concept of trans/Ibericity can be understood as a demand for the fundamental right of citizenship above all else. But in order to merit this right, the subject must pass through a process of self-translation, making use of their intrinsic "revolutionary capacity […] to transform themselves" (Saramago 1994, in Sáez Delgado 2020, 58), a first step for the transformation of their social and cultural circumstances. This process of self-translation of the subject would also free it from the patriarchal-colonialist tradition of Iberian history (cf. 1999, 98). A new conception of citizenship and democracy would make Iberia capable of self-translating into a transibericity beyond all state and identity ideological constraints. But this transibericity would have to be conceived "without exceptions that kill or hegemonies that assassinate", as Saramago warned in a conference given in Edinburgh in 1993 (in Sáez Delgado 2020). To the idea that the Iberian Peninsula belongs to European culture, Saramago opposes another vision of the history of the Iberian peoples, one that is distinguished by forms of unity and transversality that today should be seen in the context of a transiberian discourse, first characterized by a postcolonial moment, and then by an increasingly emphatic decolonial tendency (cf. Baltrusch 2023):

'fact of difference' inspired by memory; Catalunya a 'fact' based on the will; Galicia a 'fact' created by the intelligence and driven by the imagination" (1980, 202).

14 In 1990, Saramago states that "something came to change my relationship, first with Spain, and then with the Iberian Peninsula as a whole […]: a new relationship that placed, over the formally and strategically conditioned dialogue between states, the continuous encounter between all the nationalities in the Peninsula, based on the search for the harmonization of interests, on the phenomenon of cultural interchange, and ultimately, on the increase of knowledge" (Saramago 1990, 5). In 1996 he writes that "the enemy is the State, not the Nation" (1996. 49, 114) and that "the dust intentionally raised in debates on nationalism only serves to hide the true source of difficulties: the intrinsic violence of the State" (49).

> I suggest that for the old Iberianism, dead and unviable in today's world, we substitute a transiberian understanding of our place in the world today, an Iberianism that answers to the necessities of our time […]. Its full accomplishment can only be achieved with the participation of all the peoples and cultures of Europe, without exceptions that kill or hegemonies that assassinate – which presupposes, probably, the need for a new understanding of democracy. (Saramago 1993, in Sáez Delgado 2020, 58)

Saramago's decolonizing vision takes up and extends what the author had said twenty years earlier (1990) when he had defined the old Iberianism as dead, but also described the impossibility of a future without Iberism and, we might add, without transiberism. In this sense, what Saramago has in mind is close to postcolonial thought on cultural translation, a current of thinking that Gayatri Spivak formulated in the following way in a conference in Vienna, in 2008:

> [P]lotting cultural translation has [...] to be put within a political context. On the level of culture as loosely held assumptions and presuppositions change is incessant. With the generations the first language changes, and the relationship to whatever is called "the culture of origin" also changes. You can constatively work at the historical difference between the production of cultural power and performatively resist to correct that. (2008, n.p.)

Thus, and although centred on the relationship between peninsular and Latin American cultures, transiberism evokes what we might call the infinite semiosis of cultural translation, a process in which every cultural or national identity always remains under construction. However, the translatability inherent in transiberism also promises the possibility of liberating the understanding of historical-cultural identities from their own origins, as well as from the need to communicate them as origin. In a sense, transiberism, as the infinite semiosis of cultural translation, has the advantage of having "already relieved the translator and his translation of the effort of assembling and expressing what is to be conveyed" (Benjamin 2004, 260).

I conclude with a proposal for the systematization of transiberian cultural translation that I think can be deduced from Saramago's thought, if considered from a hermeneutic perspective. The three aforementioned key ideas begin with (1) an unconditional acceptance of the pluricultural nature of the Iberian Peninsula, that is, the acceptance of the different "facts of difference". But these "facts of difference" would not put into question (2) the existence of a common basis for Iberian cultures that would differentiate them from the rest of Europe. Today, this differentiation moves them, both diachronically and synchronically, towards (3) a necessary dialogue with the paradox, or

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para-doxa of postcolonial Latin American and African cultures. This is, nevertheless, a hermeneutics of cultural translation that aims to avoid conflating the three zones of conflict I have already mentioned, zones which exert pressures and influences of the most varied sort, from a European perspective: the state powers, namely Spain and Portugal, with the European Union and global capitalism as third and fourth elements; nationalist projects, with the inevitable power imbalances between state nationalisms and nationalisms of the periphery; and, finally, debates over cultural identity, which should be thought of independently of states and nationalism. In this sense, Saramago's notion that "everything is translation" and that "everyone is a translator" places an ethical demand on the subject. The "text-translation", whether in the restricted literary sense or as the starting point for a given epistemological or cultural constellation, directs itself at an Other as a proposal and strategy of translation. And not only in the sense of me recognizing myself in an Other, but above all it allows me to discover the Other in myself. This is a new and more complete "translation-text", a utopian but nevertheless concrete "other-place". In part, this "other-place" may be as unreachable as Benjamin's "pure language", but it might also serve to dignify the multiple "in-between-places" in those cultures that, in one way or another, will continue to stage the cultural variety of that which has been.

I conclude by drawing from Saramago's thought elements for a philosophy of the transiberian cultural translator. In the *Diálogos com José Saramago,* the author confesses that "that which I aspire to translate is simultaneity, is saying everything at the same time" (in Reis 1998, 138).[15] This is an affirmation that is so fundamental to Saramago's work that it should not be understood solely as part of an artistic-literary project (Saramago never spoke of a project, although it is inevitable that we try to deduce one from his work). What is far more significant, and which is implicit in this phrase, is something that has until now gone unnoticed: a philosophical and socio-political project that is also a project of cultural translation, or, we might add, a project of transiberian cultural translation.

15 In his diaries, he complements this idea with the notion of reproducing the "breath of the collective voice" (1996, 73).

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