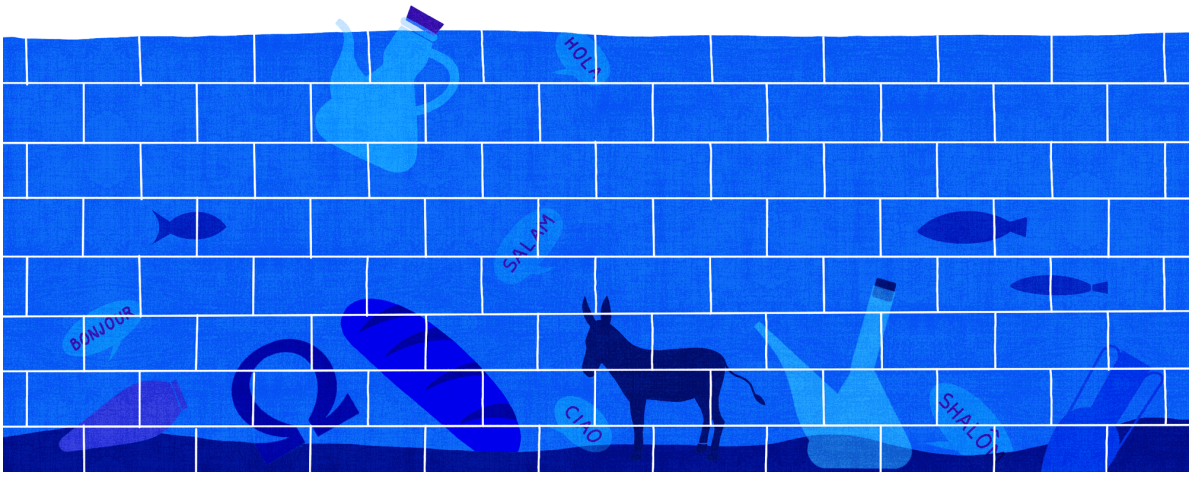
CULTURAL EXHIBIT

Return to the Mediterranean

Santiago Alba Rico



Il·lustració de Carole Hénaff

In 1904, the brilliant writer Benito Pérez Galdós (1843-1920) published the only novel of his invaluable *National Episodes* that takes place outside Spain. It is called *Aita Tettauen*, the sixth of the fourth series, in which the author uses the characters, Juan Santiuste and Mohamed El Nasiry, to avidly criticise the colonial episode pompously called “War of Africa”: the military confrontation with the Sultan of Morocco which would lead to the occupation of Tetouan in 1859. If the position of our writer against the war is going to become more and more clear to the public, especially from the Tragic Week of Barcelona (1909) – the revolt of the people of Barcelona against selective recruitment -, his literary work interprets this opposition as a human approach to the “enemy” and an ironic misunderstanding, at ground level, of the reasons for the war, since Galdós does not see any difference between the foot soldiers: “I’ll tell you another thing so that you get the right picture of the African wars, and that is that the Moor and the Spaniard are more like brothers than they seem. Take away a bit of religion, take away another bit of language, and kinship and family resemblance are obvious. What more is the Moor than a Mohammedan Spaniard? And how many Spaniards do we see who are Moors dressed as Christians?” At a later date, Galdós refers to Spain as “a baptised Barbary” and insists that between a Basque and an Andalusian there are many more differences than “between a person from Malaga and the Berber who are now going to fight over a blade of honour.”

It can obviously be argued that Galdós is thinking about the legacy of Al-Andalus and the common history between Spain and North Africa, but we are equally entitled to point to a broader familiarity. If a person from Malaga and a Moroccan are more alike than a Basque and an Andalusian, it is because of their shared Mediterranean identity. Anyone who has visited the eastern Mediterranean – hastily called “Arab” – and then travelled to Latin

America, perplexedly discovers a cultural leap that is difficult to explain: it happens that a Moroccan or a Tunisian, who speaks a different language, seems closer to us and more understandable than a Venezuelan or a Honduran, who speak Spanish like us. There is a double misunderstanding here due to linguistics: we believe that language, supported by underground “material plates”, explains in this way to subjects that all understanding is necessarily verbal and all distancing non-verbal. Hence the – let’s put it like this – “cultural vertigo” that invades our minds every time we feel comfortable with someone who speaks Arabic and strangers and distant with someone who speaks our own language: who speaks our own language, yes, but who comes from a radically different landscape, sea and table. Words are easy to translate; light, wine, almond and oil, not so much.

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Fernand Braudel, the invaluable historian of the Mediterranean, distinguished between two Mediterraneans: the heart, made up of the “liquid plains” —that is, the continental coasts and the islands— and the “borders”, among which must be the Sahara, the Black Sea, the Balkans and the Atlantic Ocean. According to Robert Lafont, there would be two Mediterraneans geographically separated by the Apennine chain, the Aspromonte and the Sicilian Channel: the eastern one, much more complex in orographic and geopolitical terms and which would include the Balkans and the Near East; and the western one, less laborious, that would go from Gibraltar to Messina. Historians must make as many distinctions as necessary to better understand a physical and cultural space, but they should also remember the material consciousness of those who populate it, which is almost always disregarded. “The adjective *Mediterranean*“, says the linguist Louis-Jean Calvet in *La Méditerranée, mer de nos langues*, “does not define a nationality but rather “a trend culture”, a set of features that converge and sometimes diverge”. And adds: “the only Mediterranean passport that exists are smells, colours and tastes.” He’s right. Now, once this revelation is accepted, one is immediately forced to approach this mystery through two inseparable questions. One: How has this “trend culture” been formed? Two: Has it been strengthened or otherwise weakened in recent years?

The first question is answered very quickly: that culture of “smells, colours and tastes” has been formed, until it constitutes a common sensitive horizon, in three ways: nature, commerce and war.

Let’s start with nature. As I said before in one of my books, the Mediterranean soil enabled the “invention” of three plants and five animals around which it then wove a dense network

of exchanges, ways of life, negotiations, myths and visions over thousands of years. The wheat, vine, olive tree. The cow, goat, sheep, horse, pig. That bread whose name was pronounced in Phrygian, without learning it, by the two children of the cruel experiment of Amenophis I and which, unleavened or leavened, is blessed on all tables, from Athens to Tetouan in one way or another. The wine of Dionysus and Noah, but also that of Abu Nawas and Rabelais. The oil of Athena and Isis, of the Hebrew kings and of Christian baptism. And the animals? The cow associated with the mythical birth of Europe. The goat Amalthea that suckled Zeus, that which houses Satan, that of Pan and Juno Sospita. The sheep that helped Ulysses to flee from Polyphemus in Crete. The winged pig of Clazómenas or those who defeated the elephants of Antigonus in Megara. Finally, the horse of Poseidon, Alejandro, the Cid, the Prophet (or the hard and faithful ass of Sancho Panza and Yuha). With these eight essential elements, supplied by a generous and familiar land, a shared lap has been interwoven that allows us to move around the Mediterranean, from one country to another, without ever feeling completely foreign. Food is the essential matrix of hospitality and the surest vehicle for all social integration: from similar raw materials, Mediterranean countries have created gastronomic variants in which, like languages, we recognise a common substrate.

These eight elements have obviously been the object of a long commercial exchange between the two shores. As the name itself indicates (“Mediterranean”, whose aquatic interposition is implicit in the Arabic “mutawasit”), its inhabitants, in the north and south, were always aware of the existence of other symmetrical lands on the other side of the horizon, even before reaching them. The first parallel coastal expeditions were followed by the audacity of the Phoenicians, who travelled not only to North Africa but also to Sicily, Sardinia and the south of Spain between the 11th and 9th centuries BC; in the opposite direction, one century later, the Greeks settled in southern Italy and Marseille and spread throughout the islands of Anatolia. Through this trade, which mixed the knowledge of both shores, languages were also spread—Indo-European and Semitic—and alphabets were chosen, this Mediterranean invention that will gradually impose itself throughout the world, except in the Far East. Words also travel and enrich native heritage: in Arabic “pen” is “qalam”, which comes from the Latin “calamus”, which in turn comes from the Greek “kálamos”, the reed or the rush; and in all Romance languages we say “lemon” or “alcohol”, terms bequeathed by the Arabs. Calvet gives a beautiful example of these linguistic journeys—sometimes back and forth—of words that are finally Mediterranean. “Apricot”, isn’t it obvious that it comes from Arabic? Well, no. The word is originally Latin (*praecoquum*); from Latin it becomes the Arabic *albarquq*, which through Al-Andalus gives rise to our *apricot*, which in turn becomes the French *abricot*. Long before capitalist globalisation stuffed our languages with English words, trade in the Mediterranean had Mediterraneanized our vernacular languages, giving them that centuries-old form that today is a bit chipped or eroded by the consumerist and technological *koyné*.

And then, as always, there’s the war. When technological progress made it possible to differentiate commercial ships from warships, traffic intensified in both directions and with both intentions. The history of the Mediterranean is a history of warlike conflicts between maritime empires. The Persians crossed into Greece via the Hellespont in the 5th century BC; Alexander the Great seized the entire eastern Mediterranean and Persia itself 150

years later. Carthage, on the African side, and Rome, on the European side, fought over the Mediterranean basin for three centuries, until in 146 Scipio destroyed the Punic power forever. In the 8th century, Muslims entered Europe through Hispania and then Sicily; then the crusades, in the opposite direction, took Jerusalem. In the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire, which reached the gates of Vienna, disputed the Mediterranean with the Austrian Empire, which conquered Tunisia in 1534. These wars, which were both political, economic and religious, tragically linked the two shores, in a balance of power that was broken in favour of the European Mediterranean with the conquest of Egypt by Napoleon in 1798. In any case, these wars not only contributed to further mixing languages and populations but also generated a framework of common dispute inseparable from shared high culture: Muslims saved Greek culture and Europeans saved the work of Averroes, threatened by Almohad fanaticism.

These three factors —material, commercial, military— established the sensitive framework of that "trend culture" mentioned above. But the second question remains unanswered: does this world of familiar colours, flavours and tastes still exist? With more or less force? Are the inhabitants of the Mediterranean still "Mediterranean"?

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I have my doubts. On the one hand, let's think of the decreasing importance of the eight essential elements of our common materiality (wheat, olive, vine, cow, sheep, goat, horse). The EU's economic policies have not only shifted real power to the north (Germany) but have also led to a radical demediterranization of the Mediterranean. In Europe this uprooting is more than evident in the cases of Spain and Greece, whose agricultural sectors have been dismantled—in favour of the services sector—or handed over to the large food industry. We have replaced vegetable gardens with highways, forests with airports, fishing boats with skyscrapers, bars and taverns with cafes and "service areas"—the "non-places" of modernity, as characterised by the anthropologist Marc Augé. The most tragic and eloquent expression of this demediterranization is the extinction of the donkeys, the driving force behind our economy until very recently, whose population has grown from 700,000 to only 30,000 in just sixty years. The donkey, the most familiar, intelligent and courageous animal, has become something rarer than a dinosaur; to the point that a European child is less excited today with *Platero*, whom he doesn't know or understand, than with a Tyrannosaurus rex, which disappeared 65 million years ago.

But not only has Europe been demediterranized. The same goes for the southern Mediterranean. The breakdown of the aforementioned millennial balance, warlike and commercial, in favour of unequal neocolonial power relations has ended up imposing this same model on the southern shore. As an extension of the colonial rule of the 19th century

and the first half of the 20th, Europe and the United States have also sought to rid themselves of Mediterranean resistance in this part of the world: from the Barcelona Conference in 1995 to the Union for the Mediterranean in 2010, all a series of initiatives and negotiations intended to extend the demediterranization to Africa and the Middle East; for the sake of cooperation, agreements signed with local dictators behind the backs of the populations sought to guarantee European investors the climate of security and free market leading to large profits. That basically required two things from the governments involved: help in the repression of "illegal emigration" or, similarly, in the accumulation of corpses in the common grave; and liberalisation of the economy or, similarly, an increase in poverty and unemployment and, consequently, of the reasons for people throwing themselves into the sea.

Now that ten years have gone by since the so-called "Arab revolutions", we should remember that those popular movements that shook the area in 2011 were actually trying to re-terrorize our common space; and in fact they are inseparable from the aftershocks that occurred in Spain, with the 15-M, but also in Greece, Italy and Turkey. This "Mediterranean revolution" did actually try to rebalance "the trend culture", not to reverse the relationship of forces but to recall the existence of that common space, and of its transformative potential, which Europeans themselves were and still are giving way. The revolutions and revolts of 2011 did serve to overthrow dictatorships and question colonial dependencies but also to bring to light the cultural diversity of a Mediterranean world somewhat suffocated or obscured by Islam and Arab nationalism: from the Kurds to the Berbers without forgetting about women, the southern Mediterranean stood up in defence of a new Mediterranean subject, stripped of combat clichés and focused on non-religious and non-nationalist identity frames: a "trend culture" community in fact.

Tunisia, the country where I live, was always more aware of this Mediterranean dimension due to its own history, but the truth is that, after the revolution of 14 January 2011, it experienced an outbreak of liberating self-awareness, reflected, for example, in vindication of the Tunisian "dialect" and its morphosemantic promiscuity, as well as in a recovery of the Berber element, erased by Bourguiba's Jacobinism. In 2012, the young Habib Sayah, a lawyer and director of the Kheireddine Institute, asked in an article: "Is Tunisia an Arab country?" And he answered bluntly: "Tunisian language and culture, which were no longer Arabic at the end of the Middle Ages, have been enriched through thousands of influences, to become unique, original and above all Mediterranean." Farhat Othman, also a jurist and former diplomat, in his criticism of the article of the new constitution on Tunisian identity in 2014, wrote: "Before being Maghreb, Tunisia was Mediterranean." And he added: "The political calculations have not changed anything: Arab and Muslim Tunisia is also historically Berber and Mediterranean from the start."

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Ten years later, the defeat of these revolutions returns this area of the world to sterile litigation, very functional for the interests of the global economy, between radical Islamist and neoliberal minorities, two forces incompatible with the “trend culture” of the Mediterranean and its “smells, colours and tastes”, a sensitive frame of all differences and relationships. The Mediterranean is once again “il mare di mezzo”, the “sea that is in the middle”, according to the title of the great book by the journalist Gabriele del Grande on clandestine migration: a sea that has never before been so difficult to cross and which has become the underwater Auschwitz of a demediterranized, intolerant and suicidal Europe.

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Santiago Alba Rico is a writer and essayist. He studied Philosophy at the Complutense University in Madrid. During the eighties, he was the scriptwriter of the legendary television show *La bola de cristal*. He has authored more than twenty books on politics, philosophy and literature, as well as three children's stories and one theatre production. His essay *Las reglas del caos* was a finalist for the 1995 Anagrama Prize. Since 1998, he has been focused on the Arab world, having translated into Spanish the Egyptian poet Naguib Surur and the Iraqi novelist Mohammed Jydair. He has also taught literature classes at the Cervantes Institute for several years. His latest books are *Ser o no ser (un cuerpo)* (Seix Barral, 2017), *Todo el pasado por delante* (Los libros de la catarata, 2017) and *Nadie está seguro con un libro en las manos* (Catarata, 2018). He regularly contributes to different media such as Público, Cuarto Poder, CTXT, Diari ARA or El País, among others. In 2019, within the project *Última hora*, he collected his radio collaborations at the program Carne Cruda.