



# TRANSLATORS' RINCON de TRADUCTORES CORNER



*A Manifesto for Reading* (excerpts)

by Irene Vallejo

*translated by*  
Erin Goodman

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## Introduction

Spanish writer, classicist, and philologist **Irene Vallejo Moreu** (b. 1979, Zaragoza) has become an unlikely superhero—a defender of books and reading, catapulted to fame by her award-winning 452-page essay on the history of books in antiquity, *El infinito en un junco* (Ediciones Siruela, 2019), which became a best-selling book in Spain during the Covid-19 pandemic. Much has been written about the power of books as portals, and over 150 years have passed since Emily Dickinson famously wrote “There is no Frigate like a Book / To take us Lands away.” If “books about books” is a genre in and of itself, then Irene Vallejo is currently at its forefront. She earned a PhD in classical philosophy from the universities of Zaragoza and Florence, and writes a weekly column for *El País* and *Heraldo de Aragón*.

In contrast to her dense 2019 masterpiece, the more recent *Manifiesto por la lectura* [A Manifesto for Reading] (Ediciones Siruela, 2020) is hardly larger than a cellular phone (screens are paper’s “light-sisters,” writes Vallejo). The diminutive 61-page *Manifiesto*, an airy delight to read, was commissioned in February 2020 by the Federación de Gremios de Editores de España (Spanish Association of Publishers Guilds) to accompany a petition proposing a “government pact” in favor of reading and books.

The “Manifesto” was envisioned and written to encourage reading on a national level. In times of fierce competition from digital forms of entertainment, Vallejo argues that reading is an active pursuit, one that engages all of our senses through imagination, and compels us to better understand the lives, feelings, and thought processes of both our contemporaries and people from distant lands and times. Citing Martha Nussbaum, she argues that reading literature is even fundamental to the success of democracy. Through reading, we can imagine a future that



will unite us. The simple, elegant prose reflects the universality of reading, and its accessibility in times of great material disparities. It was an honor to translate this selection from the *Manifiesto por la lectura*, about a topic near and dear to literary translators: the capacity of literature to shape our worldviews and to put ourselves, as readers, in others' shoes.

### About the translator

Erin Goodman's translations have been published in *New England Review*, *Los Angeles Review*, *The Lifted Brow*, and *Poetry International Rotterdam*, among others. She is a frequent translator for the *New York Times* Opinion Section, and the translator or co-editor of several non-fiction books and a forthcoming selection of poetry by Juana Rosa Pita (b. 1939, Havana), titled *The Miracle Unfolds* (Song Bridge Press, 2021). Erin holds a Certificate in English-Spanish Translation from the University of Massachusetts Boston, an Ed.M. from Harvard University, and a B.A. in International Relations from Wellesley College.

egoodman8@gmail.com



# A MANIFESTO FOR READING<sup>1</sup>

## II

### Wings and Foundations

Humans are able to narrate, read, and write because we have developed the wonderful tool of language. Through words, we can share inner worlds and fanciful ideas. When animals daydream—if such a thing is possible—they lack the tools to tell other animals about it. Some species are endowed with means of communication—some of which are astonishingly complex—but none can compare with ours in terms of flexibility, freedom, and richness of nuance. This linguistic marvel allows us to coexist in two geographies: in the tangible space we inhabit together with thousands of other species, and in a parallel universe that is exclusively ours: the worlds of fantasy, possibilities, and symbols, which no other creature can access.

Driven by language and creativity, our brains branched off from mere biological evolution with its relentlessly slow pace and took flight on the swift wings of cultural evolution. Thousands of years ago, the development of a sophisticated new technology—writing systems—opened the doors to the preservation of knowledge, ideas, and dreams, so we can expand them and revive them with each glance that falls on the words of a page. Philosopher Richard Rorty believes that reading transformed our minds irreversibly. Thanks to reading, we have developed an anomaly called ‘inner eyes.’ Discovering the characters in a story is like meeting new people and becoming acquainted with their personalities and their reasoning. The more different these characters are from us, the more they broaden our horizons and enrich our worlds. Through books, we inhabit the skin of others, caress their bodies, and drift into their gaze. And, in a narcissistic and self-centered world, the best thing that can happen to any one individual is to become everyone.

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<sup>1</sup> The Observatorio would like to sincerely thank Ediciones Siruela for granting permission to publish this translation of extracts from Irene Vallejo’s *Manifiesto por la lectura*, which has allowed us to commemorate World Book Day 2021 in this very special way [Editors’ note].



Reading has never been a solitary activity, even when we practice it alone in the privacy of our homes. It is a collective act that brings us closer to other minds and ceaselessly affirms the possibility of a rebellious understanding, impervious to barriers of centuries and borders. Along the path to pleasure, reading offers suspension bridges of words across abysses of difference. Psychologist Raymond Mar and his team at the University of Toronto proved in 2006 that people who read, especially those who read literature, are more empathetic than non-readers. In one experiment, a group of students had to choose between two envelopes: inside one was Chekhov's tale "The Lady with the Dog"; the other contained a text that described exactly the same sequence of events, but in a neutral, semi-documentary language, lacking the inflections of the age-old craft of storytelling. Those who read Chekhov's words, especially those who were most moved by the story, scored higher on the empathy spectrum. The ability to immerse oneself in another's world and dive into distant waters not only enhances our levels of intimacy, but also our personal lives, daily conviviality, and social skills. Its benefits can even extend to international relations and corporate achievements.

The habit of reading does not necessarily make us better people, but it does teach us to observe with our mind's eye the vastness of the world and the enormous variety of circumstances and beings that inhabit it. Our ideas become more agile and our imaginations more enlightening. By peering into a tale, we can escape and cast ourselves onto the characters of an invented landscape. Mario Vargas Llosa has expressed it as

this unjust life, a life that forces us always to be the same person when we wish to be many different people, so as to satisfy the many desires that possess us. [...] Good literature, genuine literature, is always subversive, unsubmissive, rebellious: a challenge to what exists.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The English translation is from: Vargas Llosa, Mario. (May 4, 2001). "Why Literature? The premature obituary of the book." *The New Republic*. <https://newrepublic.com/article/78238/mario-vargas-llosa-literature> [Translator's note].



We long to see through different eyes, think with other ideas, and feel new passions. Donning the magical lenses of fiction, we observe through them and slip into the pleasures, terrors, and ambitions of others. Without leaving the comfort of our beds, the vast universe can belong to us with its immensity at arms-length.

In invented worlds we meet and understand each other and learn to collaborate. American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who won the Princess of Asturias Award for Social Sciences, argues that reading is part of the fundamental preparation for living in a democracy. Ever since its emergence in Greece thousands of years ago, democracy has remained the most challenging and amazing system humans have attempted. Rather than by force, democracy fosters coexistence by upholding a delicate tapestry of agreements and ongoing dialogue. Antonio Basanta reminds us that the word in Spanish for ‘reader,’ *lector*, derives from the term ‘elector.’ In the daily cadence of the democratic experience, each and every one of our votes leads to decisions that will impact the lives of others. In a text entitled *The Silent Crisis*, Nussbaum reflects:

The ability to imagine the experience of another [...] needs to be greatly enhanced and refined if we are to have any hope of sustaining decent institutions across the many divisions that any modern society contains.<sup>3</sup>

The better we are at acrobatics, cartwheeling into the gaze of others, the more solid our democracy will be. Paradoxically, taking flight strengthens our foundations.

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<sup>3</sup> The English translation is from: Nussbaum, Martha C. (2010). *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Part I: The Silent Crisis). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. [Translator’s note].



## IV

### Ghost Voices

No one knows when or where the first story was told. It was probably in a cave, by the dancing light of a bonfire. The first to create their own genealogy of stories were tribes, then villages, then cities and empires. Eastern cultures were the earliest to put them in writing, and thus narratives began their journey through geography and centuries. These anonymous and universal tales have been great voyagers. Anyone who knows a good story wants someone else to hear it, feels the immediate need to share it: “Have you heard the story of the child without a shadow? Do you know the tale of the lovers and the ghost? Once upon a time...” Intrigued, everyone listens attentively.

Stories tell us how other people, who may have died before we were born, felt and dreamed. We can even hear them alive within us, an incantation that would be impossible for any other species. Starting with the *Iliad*, the birth of European literature, we mentally reconstruct past times, listening to voices from other millennia. Printed words may be but the ghosts of voices or the shadows of minds, but they matter to us. They extend our transitory existences, adding to readers’ lives the lives of all the ages, merging thousands of years of knowledge with their own. Each reader’s life is extended by the confluence of a tangible reality and a reconstructed past. Time machines do exist: they are books.





## VIII

### A Tool for Rebuilding

We are living through times of crisis, change, and uncertainty. It is precisely at these crossroads that we must return to books, to lines from the past that will remind us that nothing we encounter is happening for the first time. In the memory of writing, we discover traces of human experience, which time and again has survived droughts, famines, plagues, traumas, and wars. Anthropologist Michèle Petit has studied the value of reading in times of collective challenge. After September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, when visual imagery was already ubiquitous, there was an influx of visitors to bookstores in New York City. Reading has been a valuable tool for rebuilding in regions afflicted by violence, economic crises, migratory exoduses, and natural disasters. Petit analyzed countless literacy initiatives in prisons, troubled neighborhoods, and programs for the rehabilitation of former guerrilla children and homeless adolescents. The result is always revealing: participants in these reading experiences “discovered in books the possibility of striking up a relationship with the world that was not based solely on predation, dominance, or utility.”<sup>4</sup> In troubled times, the written word acts as a reliable repository for the ideas that anchor and rescue us.

As products of this frenetic millennium, our imaginations are colonized by speed, immediacy, and reproducibility. We are in love with acceleration and dazzled by instant connections, dizzying processors, the miracle of pressing a button and quickly communicating across immense distances. But all of that fast and fabulous technology is the product of a slow-working machine: the human brain. And its slowness is precisely the secret of its refined operation. The ideas that sustain our rationality need time, calm, and care to develop. As the Roman historian Tacitus wrote: “Truth is confirmed by inspection and delay; falsehood by haste and uncertainty.”

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<sup>4</sup> The English translation of this quotation is mine [Translator’s note].



Prisoners of haste, we have brushed aside the teaching and learnings of patience. We can call this lack of cognitive serenity a distraction crisis. Guy Debord affirmed that the time we live in pushes us to be spectators rather than readers; that is, to dilute the act of reading into the docility of viewing. Reading is not passive like hearing or seeing: it is a form of recreation and mental effervescence. We read at our own pace, we modulate our speed, and we internalize what we choose to assimilate, not what is thrown at us so quickly, and in such quantities, that we become overwhelmed. In these fast-paced times, books emerge as allies to help us recover the pleasure of concentration, intimacy, and calm. Thus, reading can become an act of resistance in an era of anxiety invaded by unbridled information.

Carmen Martín Gaité mused in *El cuento de nunca acabar* [The Never-ending Story] that reading and writing

is like standing firm against all the hustle and bustle, standing tall through thick and thin, as if millenary roots sprouted from our feet [...], as if we were in a quiet, padded enclosure, or on a desert island, or watching a cheery, peaceful landscape from our tower battlements, safe from death, flux, and hurriedness.<sup>5</sup>

Books respect our attention. They keep us disconnected from emergencies, notifications, and advertising. They don't need batteries to recharge, they're sturdy and they can also be beautiful. They're not subject to planned obsolescence, and their useful lives last for centuries. We can hear them, smell them, stroke them. Paper may coexist harmoniously and peacefully with its light-sisters, screens, but it has an aura that we literature enthusiasts love and value.

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<sup>5</sup> The English translation of this quotation is mine [Translator's note].





## *Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner*

Disponibles en/available at: <http://cervantesobservatorio.fas.harvard.edu/en/translation-corner>

1. RT/TC 001 (2019). "A Letter of Federico García Lorca to his Parents, 1935". Author: Federico García Lorca (Spain); Translator: Christopher Maurer; Genre: Letter.
2. RT/TC 002 (2019). "Like a Night with Legs Wide Open". Author: José Alcántara Almánzar (Dominican Republic); Translator: Luis Guzmán Valerio; Genre: Short Story.
3. RT/TC 003 (2019). "In the Parks, at Dusk" and "I Only Think of You". Author: Marina Mayoral (Spain); Translator: María Socorro Suárez Lafuente; Genre: Short Story.
4. RT/TC 004 (2020). "The Guide through Death" and "The Fat Lady". Author: Guadalupe Dueñas (Mexico); Translator: Josie Hough; Genre: Short Story.
5. RT/TC 005 (2020). "The Case of the Unfaithful Translator". Author: José María Merino (Spain); Translator: Erin Goodman; Genre: Short Story.
6. RT/TC 006 (2020). "The Guerrilla Fighter" and "May as Well Call it Quits". Author: Albalucía Ángel Marulanda (Colombia); Translator: Daniel Steele Rodríguez; Genre: Short Story.
7. RT/TC 007 (2020). "Miguel Hernández' Speech to His Companions in the Ocaña Jail". Author: Miguel Hernández (Spain); Translator: Constance Marina; Genre: Speech.
8. RT/TC 008 (2020). "On the Road to Houmt Souk". Author: Soledad Puértolas (Spain); Translator: Francisca González Arias; Genre: Short Story.
9. RT/TC 009 (2020). *Rincón de Traductores / Translators' Corner – Volume 1: Compilation 2019-2020*. Various Authors; Various Translators.
10. RT/TC 010 (2020). *Waiting for the Revolution: Cuba, the Unfinished Journey* (excerpt). Author: Gustavo Gac-Artigas (Chile); Translator: Andrea G. Labinger; Genre: Chronicle.



11. RT/TC 011 (2020). “A Bad Girl”. Author: Montserrat Ordóñez (Colombia); Translator: Clara Eugenia Ronderos; Genre: Short Story.
12. RT/TC 012 (2020). “Claudia and the Cats”. Author: Ivanna Chapeta (Guatemala); Translator: Lindsay Romanoff Bartlett; Genre: Short Story.
13. RT/TC 013 (2021). *Song of Being and Nonbeing*. Author: Santiago Alba Rico (Spain); Translator: Carolina Finley Hampson; Genre: Poetry.
14. RT/TC 014 (2021). “Christmas Eve in the Hills of Jaruco”. Author: Robert F. Lima Rovira and Robert Lima (Cuba/USA); Translator: Robert lima; Genre: Chronicle.
15. RT/TC 015 (2021). *Three Poems*. Author: José Luis García Martín (Spain); Translator: Claudia Quevedo-Webb; Genre: Poetry.