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The KIO Towers

by José Luis Castillo Puche

translated by
Douglas Edward LaPrade

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Introduction

José Luis Castillo Puche (1919-2004) was a novelist and journalist from Yecla (Murcia), in Spain. After the Spanish Civil War, he studied at the Jesuit seminary in Comillas, Cantabria (in Northern Spain), but he abandoned the clerical vocation to become a writer. He wrote a novel criticizing the seminary entitled *Sin camino* (1956), which was censored by Franco and later published in Argentina upon the recommendation of writer Pío Baroja. Franco's censors also eliminated some passages from another novel by Castillo Puche entitled *Paralelo 40* (1963), about the presence of the U.S. Air Force in Spain after the establishment of the air base in Torrejón near Madrid, but the novel was allowed to be published in Spain. Castillo Puche won Spain's Premio Nacional de Literatura Miguel de Cervantes in 1958, and the Premio Nacional de Novela y Narrativa in 1982. In his novels about the repercussions of the Spanish Civil War, the writer refers to his hometown of Yecla by the fictional name of Hécula—the Fundación José Luis Castillo Puche publishes a journal entitled *Hécula*. The Spanish novelist and journalist lived in New York from 1967 to 1971, when he served as foreign correspondent for the newspaper *Informaciones*. He also collaborated with the newspaper *Pueblo*, and taught journalism at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Having met Ernest Hemingway and written a book about their friendship and travels, Castillo Puche sponsored a journalism prize named for Hemingway that was awarded to Spanish journalists.

"Las Torres de KIO," the poem presented here in English translation as "The KIO Towers," is about the construction of the twin leaning towers on the Paseo de la Castellana at the Plaza de Castilla in Madrid, the KIO Towers, which were built between 1989 and 1996. They stand twenty-six stories high and are tilted toward each other at an angle of fifteen degrees, suggesting an incomplete arch over the Paseo de la Castellana. Their name refers to the Kuwait Investment Office, which commissioned the structures.

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José Luis Castillo Puche composed the original Spanish version of his poem in 1994 while construction was still in progress. The poem was published in 2014 in *Hécula: Revista de la Fundación Castillo-Puche* (Number 3). The twin KIO Towers also are known as the Gate of Europe because they symbolize Spain's Transition and entry into the European Union. In his satirical poem, José Luis Castillo Puche interprets the towers as symbols of fiscal fraud and political corruption. The poem concludes with a grotesque allusion to the Pillars of Hercules on Spain's coat of arms.

About the translator

Douglas Edward LaPrade is professor of American literature at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. He spent two Fulbright grants in Spain, where he met José Luis Castillo Puche, Ernest Hemingway's friend and biographer. LaPrade has published books in Spain about Hemingway. He is a member of the board of the Fundación José Luis Castillo Puche.

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THE KIO TOWERS

From the highest angelic cornices
of the Seventh Heaven
to the dark basement of pure hellishness
an ancient or reborn Tobias
in the glassen,
garish,
lavish,
pseudo-romantic attics
of the well-defined and unconsciously warlike
avenue of the Castellana,
contemplates,
laments,
admires,
is amazed and frightened by,
that display of cement and glass,
urban larceny of old devastated areas,
corrupt bureaucracy
and rentier fauna,
he takes pleasure in the polychromatic reflections,
absurd stained glass window of a lay cathedral,
while featherless pigeons
crash, screech,
within the pointed beak of gnawing vultures,

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and even distracted angels
seek some invisible star
in the bleached white,
detergent,
midday light, molten whiteness,
oh, vision without smoke or purple wind,
there, over there, in the background,
immobile
wedges toward the sky,
visible skeletons and macabre models
of financial fraud,
the KIO Towers,
twins,
fortified before they were born,
not parallel,
leaning,
unbalanced,
pleading,
vestiges of an arrogant future
—Gate of Europe—
open and fluctuating Gate,
Incomplete,
Uncertain,
threatening,
unfinished symphony of an aberrant urban development,
magnetized as astral lures,
unfinished dream,
lame syllogism,

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truncated, shortened towers,
unstable parallelograms,
laughable verticality,
vacuous horns of false plenty
and the risky, illegal, fraudulent
business deals;
hideous irons
interwoven by grotesque railings,
specious and farcical stage set
for a future with no present;
urban Babel,
comic,
monumental architecture,
audacious,
deceptive, defeated,
engineering prank
—oh, I'm falling—
for simpletons and naïve citizens.
To climb up? How?
up, down, sideways,
to dive fatally into the steps
to end up in a kind of basement-chapel-toilet.
To the right or to the left?
That depends on your standpoint
and that's why the security guards are there,
surrounding troops, without uniforms,
or with dirty green or traditional bluish jumpsuits
although sometimes also

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a man in formal attire appears
with a top hat and the torch of a sinister executioner
who guards the future
of the bold construction,
and tells us "stop," "pass" or "continue"
and he doubtlessly prepares the inauguration
of the tilted millennium,
uncertain,
indecipherable,
with an abundance of undersecretaries
stuffed in gray suits
and shiny black shoes,
as shiny
as the old three-cornered hats worn by the Guardia Civil
on solemn, ceremonial days.
Grounded,
the KIO Towers remain inaccessible,
gutted
like a failed,
frustrated project,
acrobatics with no impetus
sipping the breeze from the Sierra
and at their feet the sad psalmody
of the municipal police
—centuries of ash—
singing the miserere,
a horrifying dissonance of raspy vinous voices,

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dismal uniforms
with buttons of dog bones
or bones of malnourished children;
barracks
of soldiers useful for all service,
undreamed palaces
renovated and
repaired;
bureaucrats who come and go
after the workday
with nausea up their ass;
office workers who fall asleep
leaning in street corners
while they wait for the bus,
and criminal politicians
who lock themselves inside their cars with bulletproof glass;
working men and women,
leaving the maggots' nest
so they don't miss the buses to Tres Cantos,
to Colmenar, to Torrelaguna,
to San Sebastián de los Reyes[1],
distorted,
scurrying,
and even mad nuns
who seek incense in the slime of the sewer;

[1] Translator's note: Suburbs of Madrid

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oh, la, la,
the face of happiness
of the dead in the diminished peace of the morgue
while highway M-30 roars beneath,
in this Madrid of mud and glass,
of cracked stone and frozen lime.
It is forbidden to lean out,
there are no windows at all,
the Towers are uninhabitable
but are rather office lairs populated by bald executives
—Gate of Europe—
scaffolding toward Europe,
unfinished, ruinous,
deplorable and clamorous,
hypothetical nexus,
gigantic link,
geometrically possible,
unreal in one's imagination,
unstable construction punished by the mountain winds,
fluctuating
like a flagpole with a white flag.
The airplanes whistle in the night sky
and in a small patio
illuminated by a streetlight
some indifferent police officers
with their batons at rest
play cards

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among the interminable coming and going of
red,
white, black,
metallic green,
yellow
cars
murmuring like a nest of maggots
and Madrid was a long, crowded maggots' nest,
enormous rump full of copulating maggots
yellowish maggots,
soft,
whitish,
big beautiful maggots
mounting the vortex of the urban sex.
And Madrid, from above,
was also
like a chaotic row of grand pianos,
decorated with silver candelabra
and ivory embedded in a brown bear fur;
a very long lizard
surrounded by starving dogs without collars,
by laborers without jobs,
with no lunchbox nor party membership card;
indifferent diplomats who cover their noses
and the distressing procession of prostitutes
always so devout, long-suffering and maternal,
and the sirens of firefighters
and of the ambulances;

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the smoothness
of the Arabs' weapons
and their kind gestures,
and the Jews' jaundice,
the contrite weeping of the tearful Christians,
a line of bishops with slot-machine miters,
bright advertisements
of the Planetarium,
of the Congress,
of the Senate,
of Madrid's Bullring,
of Almudena Cathedral,
of the buses that come and go,
trains that arrive and depart;
labor unions at a protest,
metal union,
construction union,
union of naked aristocrats,
union of police with open zippers,
union of bishops,
television union,
union of the national circus;
the temptation to look down is always greater
than that of looking up,
at the sky,
even if the sky seems very close,
a dark sky,
cloudy,
mysterious,

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and everything is a mystery,
Kyrie eleison
Kyrie eleison.
Ambulances
driven by archangels,
hearses
driven by clowns,
bold airplanes of the starways
above the endless caravan
of hearses,
along the Castellana,
from Cibeles to La Vaguada,
from Chamartín station to Tres Cantos and Colmenar,
from Nuevos Ministerios to El Escorial.[2]
Temptation of the heights
from a hypothetical one hundredth floor,
supreme temptation
to touch the curve of the unfinished apex,
to reach the pinnacle
between searchlights and red lights
—finis coronat opus
say the Latin teachers,
almost always priests who don't know Latin—,
and the unforeseen was the crowd
that started to appear between cranes and scaffolds
in slow ceremony:

[2] Translator's note: The Cibeles Fountain is an 18th-century monument in central Madrid depicting mythological figures; La Vaguada is a modern shopping center in a newer part of Madrid. Commuters depart from Madrid's train stations at Chamartín and Nuevos Ministerios for the suburbs.

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expeditious managers,
arrogant architects,
weary foremen,
servile construction technicians,
agile elevator mechanics,
haggard construction workers,
glossy firefighters,
nervous electricians,
plumbers, metal workers and mechanics,
in a confusing racket
until other solemn people
stood out,
perhaps representatives of the big corporations,
maybe the owners or partial owners of the towers,
people wearing a turban and a djellaba,
with infinite sadness in their eyes,
and easy reverence;
also brand-new bankers made of plastic
with cigars in their mouths,
and marchionesses and duchesses
with high ornamental hair combs
and at their sides were stationed guards with big mustaches,
feathers in their helmets and white gloves.
Flashes from the innumerable
photographers
and music and folding screens and Persian rugs;
the KIO towers were having a dazzling triumphal celebration
in the dark night,

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fireflies in the distance,
giant worms on the Telefónica building
And above the "Pirulí"
television tower[3].
"Glory to God in the highest"
And on earth corrupt politicians,
right reverend bishops and archbishops
incorrupt,
circumflex
and periphrastic;
decorated generals,
perhaps defeated yet vibrant
and suddenly there began to proceed
in orderly fashion,
disciplined, submissive and obliging
waiters in mourning
carrying little trays
with pieces of traditional tortilla
and canapés of Murcian caviar,
when there appeared a timid and gaunt Hercules
who placed the sole of each foot
on the rectangular roof
of each of the towers
—Gate of Europe—

[3] Translator's note: "Pirulí" is the nickname of Torrespaña, or Spain Tower, which was built to facilitate television broadcasts of the 1982 World Cup of soccer in Spain. This technological structure is another symbol of Spain's Transition following the Franco era.

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and his trembling and decadent thighs
straddling the two twin towers
formed an obscene and ridiculous arch
over the Plaza de Castilla
and then
the dreamt of, unpresentable Hercules
urinated copiously on the city
and beneath the black vault of the dark night
Hercules' organ
was left with its little mouth open
like a thirsty fish
from the dry terrigenous plain.

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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.

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20. RT/TC 020 (2021). *Three Poems*. Author: Julia Barella (Spain); Translator: Sarah Glenski; Genre: Poetry.

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