Translation as Interpretation in Medieval Iberian Religious Thought

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The premodern Iberian Peninsula was home to a series of thinkers that not only practiced translation, but who also included instances of translation and language use in fictional narratives that underscored the acquisition of knowledge as central in a person's spiritual development and the only means through which they may access the divine. Medieval translation is often portrayed by the *translatio imperii* or *studii* models which represent knowledge as something appropriated communally by the victors, symbolic of one civilization or site of learning replacing another. In this paper, though, I explore a series of examples that reveal a different discourse of translation, according to which language and knowledge are tools that can be used to access forms of knowledge that lie beyond language. The examples I use include the works of Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al- Malik ibn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185 CE), Moses Maimonides (d. 1204 CE), and Alfonso de la Torre (d. 1461 CE), which were designed to communicate presumably universal ideas about God and knowledge that transcend language.

The concepts of *translatio studii* and *translatio emperii*, Latin concepts that impose a teleology of knowledge transmission and cuasi military-political dominance, according to which wisdom accrues and moves through a series of civilizations, Greece to Rome to Christian Europe, implies winners and losers. It is the product of a teleology that ultimately serves the notion of historical progress and the cultural superiority of Western civilization as rightful inheritor of the best of human (read 'Western') culture. This narrative—the idea that Greek culture was passed on like a golden nugget from one western civilization to another and is part of gives the West its identity—has a deep and long history in Europe, articulated as early as the twelfth century in Chrètien de Troyes' *Cligés* (ll. 25-42), but modern critics such as Azzedine Haddour and Kwame Anthony Appiah have recently been critical of this narrative:

> The idea that the best of the culture of Greece was passed by way of Rome into western Europe gradually became, in the middle ages, a commonplace. In fact this process had a name. It was called the "*translatio studii*": the transfer of learning [. . .] So from the late middle ages until now, people have thought of the best in the culture of Greece and Rome as a civilisational inheritance, passed on like a precious golden nugget, dug out of the earth by the Greeks, transferred, when the Roman empire conquered them, to Rome [. . .] But the golden-nugget story was bound to be beset by difficulties. It imagines western culture as the expression of an essence – a something – which has been passed from hand to hand on its historic journey. The pitfalls of this sort of essentialism are evident in a wide range of cases.

Many of the critics who have explored large scale translation efforts in medieval Iberia, most notably those of Toledo—critics such as Robert Burns, Luis Suárez Fernández, Francisco Márquez Villanueva and Sharon Kinoshita--have characterized these movements as part of this *translatio imperii* and *studii* both of Classical and "Eastern" material introduced to Europe. Classical knowledge in Arab garb was appropriated in the so-called Reconquest or the Christian appropriation of previously Muslim ruled territory and then translated and exported across Western

Europe.[1] Márquez Villanueva the later phase under Alfonso X as, "the greatest transference of knowledge from East to West seen in the Middle Ages" (76).[2] Similarly, Charles Burnett has recently shown that while there may have been no physical "school of translators" under either archbishop Raimundo (d. 1152) or later under Alfonso X (d. 1284), Toledo was "the European center for the translation of texts from Arabic into Latin in the Middle Ages" (9).

Instead of focusing on this chapter of Arabic-Latin Iberian translation, in this article I turn first to an earlier chapter of Iberian translation and interpretation—one in which the ideas of Aristotle, as well as several other thinkers who wrangle with how God and man communicate, were adopted and transformed in the form of imaginative fiction in Arabic. I also examine how this early chapter of Iberian translation is similarly packaged for a later fifteenth-century Castilian audience in Alfonso de la Torre's *Visión deleytable* (*Visión*). In these works, in lieu of knowledge as a commodity—a gold nugget to be hunted and horded like treasure—several Andalusi scholars identified it with the divine and described it as an eternal flame to which any person willing to perfect their own intellect could have access--an access that language skills and translations may facilitate, but that are not in all cases necessary. In this paper I focus on scholars who have not only been credited with translating important philosophical works and composing original interpretations on those works, but also with penning original works in which the act of translation and interpretation, whether between fictional characters or author and reader, or even human and God, is the focus of critical inquiry.

Eleventh-, twelfth- and thirteenth-century scholars working in the Iberian Peninsula, were prolific in their translations of works from past cultures, including those from the heart of Western history, Greece and Roman, but also those whose role in the Latin past are more disputed, Hebrew and Arabic (and, by extension, those to which the latter reach, such as the Persian, Syriac, Armenian, etc.). Among several important Andalusi scholars, also translators of a variety of works into a variety of languages, translation was more than a simple act of transmission or a colonizing act as per the *translation studii* and *imperii* models, although it could be that as well. For scholars such as Ibn Ṭufayl and Maimonides translation is expressed as an act by which an individual or several individuals can contribute to a larger, universal good. In translating texts about divine truth (the goal of natural and moral philosophy in Andalusi and later medieval scholastic culture) that supposedly exist outside of time and human frameworks such as language, these authors seek to give shape to such truth/s in an admittedly imperfect language. This process is encompassed by terms for what is often rendered in English as 'translation,' but which encompasses simultaneously 'interpretation.' The Arabic term ترجم *tarğama* and the Hebrew term תרגם , *t-r-g-m* are multivalent and connote in English both 'to translate' and 'to interpret.' In addition, there are several other terms, such as تأويل *taʾwīl* 'allegorical commentary,' פרש *p-r- š,* 'to disseminate' and העתקה *ha-ʿataka*, 'to copy,' used by these authors to refer to their own work and that of their fellow philosophers and theologians, who also translated, copied and wrote commentaries on philosophic and religious texts, and that similarly blur the semantic distinctions made in English between translation and these other activities.[3]

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[1] The translation movements in Toledo span the course of two and half century, from archbishop Raimundo's so called "school of translators" to Alfonso X's patronage of translations of scientific, philosophic and to a much smaller degree, literary texts from Arabic into Castilian. See Burnett and Márquez Villanueva.

[2] See also Kinoshita (377).

[3] תרגם *t-r-g-m* in Hebrew is a quadrilateral defined first as 'interpret, translate' in Brown, Driver, Briggs (1076). The latter suggest it may derive from *r-g-m*, 'conjecture, opine.' Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1311) in *Lisān al ʿArab,* gives the interpreter/interpretation of language (المفسر للسان *al-mufassir l-il-lisān*) as the first definition or ترجم *tarğama*. See also ترجم in Lane, 37. تأويل *taʾwīl* means 'discovering' 'revealing' explaining' 'interpreting' and refers to an 'allegorical

Andalusi scholars contributed to the development of the Arabic philosophical premise, based in Aristotelian and Neoplatonic traditions that "how by thinking of and, in fact, along with God's mind, i.e. universal and eternal ideas, man can eventually unite with it. Knowledge of truths leads to union with God's mind" (Afterman 61). Humans and scholars seek God, but must leave the material world, including their body in order to do so. What role does language play in communicating this experience? Medieval scholars' stance on the origin of language—whether it is a divine gift from God, originating and thus identifiable with God, or whether it is tool developed among humans in this world—is key to understanding how these scholars interpret language as medium of either actualizing knowledge of God or approximating knowledge of God. For the latter, those for whom language is an aspect of the material world, communicating knowledge of God is in itself an act of translation.

The protagonist of an early Iberian work of imaginative fiction, Ibn Ṭufayl 's eponymous *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, is the essence of man—a boy raised untainted by civilization, contact with other humans, organized religion or language.[4] However, he has discovered through observation of his natural surroundings that there is a God and then spends his days—until the arrival of Absal—in contemplation and union with God (فناء *fanā*ʾ).[5] After a lifetime of taking care of his bodily needs and observing and imitating the heavenly bodies, Ḥayy achieves union with God, overcoming his own self-consciousness: "From memory and mind all disappeared, 'heaven and earth and all that is between them' [. . .] and with them vanished the identity that was himself. Everything melted away [. . .] All that remained was the One" (149). Josef Puig Montada has examined how Ibn Ṭufayl adopts Ibn Sīnā's fusion of Aristotelian and Sufi Neo-platonic thought, portraying Ḥayy's experience via his intellect of the God/ First Cause (which he experiences as the sight of "the sun appearing in a polished mirror"), the celestial spheres and how all of the created world emanates from them according to the neo-Platonic epistemology of Abū ʿAlī al-Husayn ibn ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037 CE) and Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE), before him (Montada 165-76; Ibn Ṭufayl, 146-47).[6] Following in the path of these thinkers, in addition to Abū Naṣr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Fārābī (d. 950 CE), all of whom he cites in the introduction, Ibn Ṭufayl shows how one might attain experience and understanding of God by continued and diligent study of the world around them, as well as shunning all material desires. This method helps Ḥayy develop his intellect, guided by the divine Active intellect toward knowledge of the First Cause. The way this process of enlightenment of knowledge acquisition is conceived is one of translation: the intellect translates between the divine and material worlds—allowing people like Ḥayy to bridge the differences between the celestial and earthly realms.

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interpretation of the Koran' according to Lane (126). According to Gesenius, עתק *ʿa-t-k* means 'to transfer' or 'to remove' (663) and according to Brown, Driver Briggs, 'to move, proceed' (801), or as noted below (note 22), "to copy" or "explain." See also פרש Brown, Driver, Briggs, 831.

[4] *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* was translated into Latin as the *Philosophicus Autodidactus* in 1671, and translated into the vernacular languages of Western/Christian Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and had a profound influence on William Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

[5] Isaac Narboni composed a commentary on the work in Hebrew which he refers to with the title, *Iggeret H.ay ben Yaqtsan/Treatise of the Union*. Zonta, 8. Abraham ibn Ezra translates Avicenna's work of the same title into Hebrew in the eleventh century. See Hughes, 194-207; Zonta, 5. According to Lawrence I. Conrad, Ibn Ṭufayl uses Sufi terms to describe Ḥayy's experiences. Absal refers to him as a *waliy*, a Sufi saint, and the transcendent experience of God, central to the work, and the description of which Ḥayy attempts to translate for Absal, is refered to as *fanā*ʾ (244; see also Hughes, 112).

[6] See also Hughes, 91-93,111-12. Al-Fārābī and Avicenna interpreted Quranic verses as reflective of the Aristotelian model of the Prime Mover and the Active Intellect (Whitman 47). For al-Fārābī, Aristotle himself intentionally writes in an obscure manner in order at once to conceal and reveal his teachings" (47).

Ibn Ṭufayl is careful to note that Ḥayy's lack of language did not impede his knowledge of God: "Ḥayy understood His words and 'heard' the summons they made. Not knowing how to speak did not prevent him from understanding" (149). It is here that the author Ibn Ṭufayl speaks directly with the reader, telling them that an exact description of what Ḥayy saw would be impossible, "Now do not set your heart on a description of what has never been represented in a human heart. For many things that are articulate in the heart cannot be described. How then can I formularize something that cannot possibly be projected in the heart, belonging to a different world, a different order of being?" (149).[7] Exact translation of the experience is beyond the capabilities of Ibn Ṭufayl and of language itself. Some things, claims Ibn Ṭufayl, will always be lost in translation. However, Ibn Ṭufayl does then go on to offer some idea, however imperfect, of what Ḥayy saw: "Still I shall not leave you without some hint as to the wonders Ḥayy saw from this height, not by pounding on the gates of truth, but by coining symbols (امثلة *amṯala*), for there is no way of finding out what truly occurs at this plateau of experience besides reaching it" (149).[8] The translation of divine truths through symbolic language was, for many medieval thinkers, the most useful form for communicating ideas about God and metaphysics, however (and necessarily) imperfect.

The ascetic, Absal, who appears in the second part of the work, is an expert in such symbolic language. He comes to what he believes to be a desert island to pursue a life of religious contemplation. It is only once Absal arrives that Ḥayy is made aware, through observation and the use of his reason—the intellectual tools that have allowed him to survive in the wilderness--that not only do humans exist, but, observing the latter's tears and prayers that Ḥayy reasons must be his form of communicating with God, he also feels a natural affinity with them. Absal begins to try and communicate with Ḥayy, using the skills he had learned in his early education:

> Years before, in his passion for the study of the more sophisticated level of interpretation (علم التأويل *ʿilm at-taʾwīl*), Absal had studied and gained fluency in many languages, so he tried to speak to Ḥayy, asking him about himself in every language he knew. But Absal was completely unable to make himself understood. Ḥayy was astounded by his performance, but had no idea what it might mean—unless it was a sign of friendliness and high spirits. Neither of them knew what to make of the other. Absal had a little food left over [. . .] He offered it to Ḥayy [. . .] Absal ate a bit and made signs to Ḥayy that he should eat some too. (*Risālat*, 90; trans., 159)

Absal is a learned religious man, an expert in *taʾwīl* who knows a variety of languages. Ibn Ṭufayl points out that languages are tools of *taʾwīl*. Absal studies the former to improve the latter. However, none of these human languages can help him communicate with Ḥayy.

Absal acquired his linguistic training in the civilization in which he was born, a populated island where a religion that sounds like one of the Abrahamic faiths was dominant. Ibn Ṭufayl

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[7] See Christopher Bürgel for a detailed analysis of relevant passages in *Ḥayy* dealing with "the problem of language" (114-115). As Bürgel points out, Ibn Ṭufayl begins the work by stating that relating the experience of God is impossible, "And if one tries to do so and the pains of talking or writing about it in books, then its essence changes (or: becomes inaccessible, (*istaḥālat*) and shifts to the other order, the speculative one. For if it is clothed in letters and sounds and brought near to the visible world, it does not in any way remain what it was" (in Bürgel, 114-115).

[8] He later warns his readers not to confuse "my symbol with what it represents. You expect a one-for-one correspondence. Such literalism is not tolerable with ordinary figures of speech, and it is all the less tolerable in this special context" (154).

describes how the language/s of organized religion on Absal's island was one of symbols and images.

> Near the island where [. . .] Ḥayy was born, there was [. . .] second island, in which had settled the followers of a certain true religion, based on the teachings of a certain ancient prophet [. . .] Now the practice in this religion was to represent all reality in symbols (امثلة *amṯala*), providing concrete images of things and impressing their outlines on people's souls [. . .] There had grown up on this island two fine young men of ability and high principle, one names Absal and the other Salaman. Both had taken instruction in this religion and accepted it enthusiastically. They practiced their religion together; and together, from time to time, they would study some of the religion's (شريعة *šarʿīa*) traditional expressions describing God (صفة الله *ṣafat Allāh*). (87-88; English trans. 156) [9]

Organized religions use symbols and "traditional expressions" or descriptions of God that are only imperfect approximations, just as Ibn Ṭufayl's own attempt to describe Ḥayy's union with God is self-admittedly imperfect and limited by the very language in it which it is expressed. Absal is "deeply concerned" with the true nature of things and makes an attempt at allegorical explanations of it; Salaman is conservative, "anxious to preserve the literal" and seeks to avoid "giving free rein to his thoughts" (156). In the figure of Salaman, Ibn Ṭufayl illustrates the type of person for whom allegorical descriptions of God and religious truth are designed and satisfy, and in the figure of Absal, he illustrates the type of person for whom such allegories are insufficient and imperfect approximation or translation of greater truths.[10] Lawrence I. Conrad identifies Absal with the *mutakallimūn* and Salaman with the Mālikī judges in contemporary twelfth-century al-Andalus (244-45). Both men believe in the same religion and live in the same society. For both, though, their organized religion and its version of God, in contrast to Ḥayy's personal experience of the deity, is mediated through language.

The idea that this religion is communicated through allegories echoes the thought of several thinkers to whom Ibn Ṭufayl was intellectually indebted, including al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī for whom: "religion is itself understood as the rhetorically persuasive means, par excellence, for directing the average person towards appropriate living" (Pessin). Allegory is a key tool in religious persuasion and the tool that is to be used for communicating Divine truth to the "masses" who, unlike the philosopher or prophet could not develop and use their Active Intellect to know this truth directly in order to live by it (Pessin, 7.1).[11] In the tale of Absal and Ḥayy, the latter knows both states, for before Absal's arrival he communicated regularly with God via his intellect (not language), but with Absal's arrival, he not only develops a taste for human food and other of the benefits of human society, but also acquires human language.

Ḥayy initially avoids eating any of Absal's food because he had developed an optimal diet for maintaining his mental acumen and attaining union with God. But he eventually tastes some,

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[9] I cite first the Arabic edition, followed by Lenn E. Goodman's English translation. Ibn Ṭufayl is careful to point out that Absal comes from an island where one of the "good religions" was accepted. Absal's religion does not have to be Islam, it can be any of the monotheistic faiths—Judaism, Christianity or Islam.

[10] For subsequent Iberian thinkers, including Maimonides and Alfonso de la Torre as explored in this article, their own translations and adaptations/interpretations, *tarğama* in the full sense of the term, of the thought of prior thinkers, Greek and Muslim, were also designed to be similarly multivalent, i.e. to speak to a wide range of audiences, to both the Salaman's and Absal's of the world, as well as to the "masses" they governed over (Salaman as king) or served (Absal as religious authority).

[11] See also Whitman, 46-49; Gutas, 225-34.

and thus becomes tainted or corrupted by the material world, which keeps him from attaining union with God for some time.[12] In this state, Ḥayy goes to Absal who teaches him language, science and religion. Little does Absal know that Ḥayy is much better acquainted than Absal with God and the created world, despite Ḥayy's lack of knowledge of civilization or language. Absal, intending to proselytize to Ḥayy, begins teaching him language.

> Absal began teaching him to talk (*al-kalām*), at first by pointing at some basic objects and pronouncing their names over and over, making him pronounce them too and pronounce them while pointing, until he had taught him nouns. Then he progressed with him, little by little and step by step, until in no time Ḥayy could speak (تكلم *takallama*). (*Risālat* 91; trans. 160)

This conception of language as a negotiated understanding, taught from one man or generation to another, reflects the thought of earlier Mu'tazlite thinkers such as Ibn Jinnī of Mosul, who was of the opinion that language developed according to convention and use (*isṭṭilaḥ*): "Is the origin of speech revelation or agreement? This is a subject that required a lot of consideration, although there is a consensus among most speculative philosophers that the origin of speech is mutual agreement and convention rather than revelation and inspiration."[13] This too is the opinion of the Mu'tazlite thinkers, Ibn al-Ḥājib and al-'Allāma al-Ḥillī, who felt that the variety of human languages was proof that each arose through convention (Gleave, 30). Surah 14.4 (the Surah of Ibrahim), "We did not send any apostle except with the language of his people, so that he might make [Our messages] clear to them," is often cited in support of this theory of language.[14]

Language's role as intermediary—both practical and symbolic in the encounter of Absal and Ḥayy--makes clear that for Ibn Ṭufayl, as for Ibn Jinnī, language is a human instrument. It is though, the tool by which divine truths can be translated into a form comprehensible to humans by way of religious allegory:

> Absal then plied him with questions and how he had come to the island. Ḥayy informed him that he had no idea of his origins. He knew of no father or any mother besides the doe that had raised him. He told all about his life and the growth of his awareness, culminating in contact with the divine. Hearing Ḥayy's description of the beings which are divorced from the sense world and conscious of the Truth—glory be to Him—his description of the Truth Himself, by all his lovely attributes, and his description as best he could, of the joys of those who reach Him and the agonies of those veiled from Him, Absal had no doubt that all the traditions of his religion about God, His angels, bibles and prophets, Judgement Day, Heaven and Hell were symbolic representations (امثلة *amṯala*) of these things that Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzan had seen for himself. His mind caught fire (نار *nār*). Reason and tradition (المعقول والمنقول *al-ma'qūl wa al-manqūl*) were at one within him. All the paths of exegesis (تأويل *ta'wīl)* lay open before him. All his old religious puzzlings (مشكل في الشرع *muškil fī*

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[12] Ivry notes that Ḥayy "can dispense with rational speculation entirely, and functions solely by intuition. Everyone else must use his (or her) intellect and pursue the sciences rationally" (166).

[13] 'Uthmān Ibn Jinnī, *Khaṣa'iṣ* I. 40-41, translated in Versteegh, 101-102.

[14] Other thinkers such as Abū ʿAlī al-Fārisī defended the position that language is revealed by God *(tawqīf)*, citing in support Surah Al-Baqarah (2).3 1-32, "And He taught Adam the Names, all of them" (). (Asín Palacios, 259; Versteegh 1997, 101; Loucel, 258-60).

al-šar'i) were solved; all the obscurities, clear. Now he has "a heart to understand." (91-92; English trans. 160)

Ibn Ṭufayl depicts organized religions as based on traditions and examples (*amṯala*), incomplete, but necessary vehicles for teaching the truth about God to the masses—humans that, unlike Ḥayy, have spent their life in the material world and its distractions, who could not understand the metaphysical truths (Aristotle's cosmos). Ḥayy, Absal and the work's philosophically minded readers could presumably understand the latter as well as understand the need for Absal's religion, which is allegorical, offering stories (*amṯala*) to explain divine truths to those who could not.[15]

Ibn Ṭufayl describes for his reader a vision of language as a tool for creating symbols that can be used to express knowledge of God, such as the knowledge or memory of the experience of union with God that Ḥayy had developed in the preceding chapters of the work. In the passage above, we see that for Ibn Ṭufayl the act of translating the experience of the divine into (an imperfect) language can only offer an approximate, inaccurate account of God through symbols, but one that is sufficient to allow communication between Absal and Ḥayy. Ibn Ṭufayl's philosophic tale—that gives fictional form to many of the ideas about the nature of man and the cosmos found in al-Ghazālī and Aristotle's works—provides an ethos of language, translation and knowledge of which we find echoes in subsequent Iberian thinkers.

Central to the Jewish traditions Maimonides interprets in light of the Arabo-Andalusi philosophic tradition is the idea that "the Torah speaks in the languages of men," a Talmudic saying that echoes Surah 14.4, mentioned above. Diamond notes that Maimonides uses this saying to translate from one symbolic system or way of seeing the world to another—translating biblical images into philosophical truths: "Maimonides transformed what was originally a Talmudic maxim intended to curtail excessive exegesis and limit normative (*halakhic*) invention into a license for translating what appeared as primitive prophetic language into a philosophically sophisticated one" (2011, 322).

Maimonides begins part I, chapter 26 of the *Guide of the Perplexed* (*Guide*) by citing and interpreting this saying. He notes that in Midrashim, "expressions which can be easily comprehended and understood by all, are applied to the Creator" (90), and then dedicates the following 30 or so chapters to unpacking this with multiple examples.[16] Maimonides also uses the Talmudic saying mentioned above in his *Mishneh Torah*, where he states succinctly that "The Torah speaks in the language of men. All these phrases are metaphorical" (I.9, 44).[17] Because the parables and allegories found in the Torah may seem to contradict the truths discovered by reason and philosophical inquiry, Maimonides in part pens the *Guide* to help those confused by such contradiction, and for whom allegories are unsatisfactory for explaining or interpreting/translating divine truths.[18] He opens the *Guide* explaining that it is intended to explain difficult, allegorical

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[15] Ivry notes, "Absal's religion, like all religions, is composed of symbols of the truth, and that some of the symbols are actually misleading, e.g. the corporeal representation of the incorporeal God." (168).

[16] On Maimonides as philologist, see Martínez Delgado, 29.

[17] According to Pessin: "Maimonides sees the Bible itself as filled with allegorical renderings […] is a literary masterpiece penned by Moses under the inspiration of the active intellect, but through his own imaginative lens: the Bible is in this sense the truth couched in imaginative and rhetorically persuasive images (such as anthropomorphic descriptions of God as sitting, standing, etc.)." According to Maimonides, "all these expressions are adapted to the mental capacity of the majority of mankind who have a clear perception of physical bodies only. The Torah speaks in the language of men. All these phrases are metaphorical" (*Guide*, I.9, 101).

[18] See Sarah Stroumsa, 25; Warren Zev Harvey, 181-188.

language necessary to understand "the science of Law [Torah] in its true sense" (*Introduction to the First Part*, trans. English trans. 5).[19] The ideal reader of the work is a believer who has studied philosophy:

> The human intellect (العقل الإنساني *al-'aql al-insānī*; השכל האנושי *ha-seḵel ha-ʾanušî*) having drawn him on and led him to dwell within its province, he must have felt distressed by the externals of the Law and by the meanings of the above mentioned equivocal, derivative, or amphibolous terms, or as he continued to understand them by himself or was made to understand them by others. Hence he would remain in a state of perplexity and confusion as to whether he should follow his intellect [. . .] My speech in the present Treatise is directed [...] to one who philosophized and has knowledge of the true sciences, but believes at the same time in the matters pertaining to Law (للامور الشرعية *l-il-umūr aš-šar'īa*) and is perplexed as to their meaning because of the uncertain terms and the parables (الأمثل *al-'amṯal*; משלים *mešalîm*). (*Introduction to the First Part*, 6, 11; Hebrew trans. 3a, 5a; English trans. 5, 10)

Like Ibn Ṭufayl who offers the tale of Absal, who puzzles over how his religious tradition can be squared with what Ḥayy explains to him of his (Aristotelian *cum* Avicennan) experience of union with the divine in *Ḥayy ibn Yaqdan*, Maimonides directs his guide to a reader similarly doubting and perplexed.[20] To keep such a reader from perplexity and doubt—whether it be doubting the validity of reason/intellect or in his "religious convictions," Maimonides has penned this guide to/explanation of the allegories and figurative language used by prophets in the Torah and by exegetes in the Talmud and Midrash:

> God, may His mention be exalted, wished us to be perfected and [. . .] because our capacity falls short of apprehending the greatest of subjects as it really is, we are told about these profound matters [. . .] in parables (أمثال *amṯāl*; משלים *mešalîm*) and riddles and very obscure words. (*Introduction to the First Part*, 9-10; Hebrew trans. 4b; English trans. 8-10)

Several of the chapters of the *Guide* are dedicated to explaining figurative language such as homonyms, metaphors and other symbolic language, as well as examples designed to instruct the reader in why a literal interpretation of such images is invalid (at least for the philosopher), as for example images endowing God and other celestial beings with human, concrete characteristics or attributes, such as wings, hearts, arms, feet, a shape, size, vision and thought (chapters I:36-49).[21]

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[19] I cite first the Hebrew translation of the *Guide* in Ibn Tibbon's 1828 version, followed by Shlomo Pines English translation (1964).

[20] And like Absal's and Ḥayy's knowledge, described as the awakening/opening of the heart/intellect, a flame of understanding unveiling knowledge of God (160). Maimonides notes of the truth in his prefatory remarks of the *Guide*: "At times the truth shines so brilliantly that we perceive it as clear as day. Our nature and habit then draw a veil over our perception, and we return to a darkness almost as dense as before. We are like those who, though beholding frequent flashes of lightning, still find themselves in the thickest darkness of the night. [. . .] There are some to whom the flashes of lightning appear with varying intervals; others are in the condition of men, whose darkness is illumined not by lightning, but by some kind of crystal or similar stone, or other substances that possess the property of shining during the night; and to them even this small amount of light is not continuous, but now it shines and now it vanishes, as if it were "the flame of the rotating sword." (*Introduction to the First Part*, 7). See Elliott Wolfson for the image of light in the theosophic experience in the medieval Jewish tradition, 104-119.

[21] See Diamond 2002.

Language and translation/commentary is in part responsible for these attributions. "All this is according to the language of the sons of man [. . .] When, however, the true reality is investigated it will be found […] that He has no essential attribute existing in true reality" (chapter I.47, 105-6). This is Maimonides' project for much of the first part, which provides a careful, philological study of how various scholars translate terms in the Pentateuch, such as שמע *šamaʿ* 'to hear', ראה *raʾah* 'to see' and how this language should be correctly interpreted (chapter 1.45, 96; 1.48, 106-108). In chapter 1.48 Maimonides refers to Onkelos' Aramaic translation of the Torah as تأويل *ta'wīl* in the Arabic original (פירוש *perûš* in Ibn Tibbon's translation) which Pines translates as "interpretation" in some cases and "translation" in others (111; Hebrew trans. 33b; English trans. 106-107).

Maimonides turns to the Aristotelian philosophical tradition of God as the Prime Cause accessed by man's intellect and explains the structure of the Universe, described by Jewish "sages" as a physical space—the celestial spheres, and the outer or uppermost sphere in which God and celestial beings dwell. Maimonides notes that these celestial spheres are not physical space, but emanation of the divine. (1.70, Hebrew trans. 72b; English trans.173). He continues to translate Midrash and the allegorical readings of the Jewish sages into the Neoplatonic and Aristotelian philosophical version of God and the universe that is beyond the scope of most people:

> We have already made clear the equivocality of the term *spirit*. We have also made clear, in the last portion of the *Book of Knowledge* [*Mishneh Torah*], the equivocality regarding these terms. Consider accordingly that these strange but correct notions attained by the speculation of the most sublime of those who have philosophized are found scattered in the *Midrashim*. When a man who has knowledge, but is not equitable, studies these texts, he laughs at them at the beginning of his study because he sees their external meanings diverge so widely from the true realities of existence. The cause of all this is, as we have told several times, the enigmatic presentation of these things, which is due to the fact that they are too strange to be understood by the vulgar. (I.70, 174)

The implications for this theory of knowledge, truth and of language's role in its transmission is articulated clearly in Maimonides letter to Samuel ibn Tibbon (d. 1132 CE), Hebrew translator of the *Guide*. In this letter, Maimonides describes ibn Tibbon's activities as both העתקה *ha-ʿatakâ* and פירוש *perûš* (as preserved in the Hebrew copies of the letter) (377; English trans., 225).[22] Both terms connote both translation and interpretation (as does the Arabic *tarğama* discussed above), and in the *Guide* are used to describe the scholar's translation of divine truths into the metaphorical language or parables.

Maimonides echoes this in the letter, when he underscores that to be a good translator one must understand parables and interpretation:

> You are thoroughly fitted for the task of translation, because the Creator has given you an intelligent mind to "understand parables and their interpretation, the words of the wise and their difficult sayings." I recognize from your words that you have entered thoroughly into the depth of the subject, and that its hidden meaning has become clear to you. I shall explain

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[22] Abraham Ibn Ezra in his commentary of the book of Isaiah defines -ʿa-t-k (Hiphil) as "1. To copy, 2. To transmit, to explain" and notes this verb is used in Isaiah 40.1. The noun used in this Hebrew translation of Maimonides' letter, *ha-ʿatakâ*, is defined as "1. Copy 2. Translation 3. Tradition" (30). Brown, Driver, Briggs, 801. On the various extant versions of the letter, see Forte.

to you in Hebrew how you shall manage with the entire translation. "Give instruction to a wise man, and he will he yet wiser; be wise, my son, and my heart also will rejoice." (221)

Maimonides states that an essential criteria for the translator or interpreter (at least of his work) is an ability to understand allegorical or figurative language, which, as he explains in the *Guide*, is the ability to understand that biblical and homiletic texts that often employ parables for those incapable of understanding metaphysical truths. As Arthur Diamond points out, "the *Guide* does not promote an allegorical interpretation of biblical passages so much as it offers a translation of biblical text from its Hebrew as commonly understood to a more nuanced language dictated by the versatile semantic range of its vocabulary" (2011, 322).

        James T. Robinson (2007) points out that Maimonides' Hebrew translator, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, did not just "translate" the *Guide*, he also interpreted it—creating not only a glossary of its technical terms—but teaching it and writing commentaries on it. The terms Maimonides uses (העתקה *ha-ʿatakâ* and פירוש *perûš*) to refer to Ibn Tibbon's activities convey commentary, translation and explanation of the context of the Judeo-Andalusi tradition from which it came, and which Ibn Tibbon needed to explain for it to make sense for a European audience (Pearce, 178). This complex process of translation and adaptation from one culture to another is also reflected in the *Guide*. In chapter 71, Maimonides notes that Judeo-Andalusi scholars, to whom he refers with the possessive "our" have adopted the Aristotelian philosophical mode of inquiry, "As for the Andalusian (الاندلسيون من أهل ماتنا *al- Andalusiyūn min ahl mātnā* ; הספרדים האנדלוסיים *ha-Sefardîm ha-ʾAndalûsîm*) among the people of our nation, all of them cling to the affirmations of the philosophers and incline to their opinions, in so far as these do not ruin the foundation of the Law" (180; Hebrew trans., 73a; English trans., 177).[23]

        That Maimonides contextualizes the role of the translator in the Aristotelian model of the Active Intellect as developed among the Arabic philosophers known in al-Andalus is clear in Maimonides characterization of Aristotle having undertaken the journey to achieve knowledge of God:

> He, Aristotle, indeed arrived at the highest summit of knowledge to which man can ascend, unless the emanation of the Divine Spirit be vouchsafed to him, so that he attains the stage of prophecy, above which there is no higher stage. And the works of Ibn Sīnā, although they contain searching investigations and subtle thought, do not come up to the writings of Abunazr Alfarabi. Still they are useful, and it is right that you should study them diligently. (228)

        Aristotle achieved the heights of knowledge, falling short only of the prophets. Maimonides here cites both Ibn Sīnā and al-Fārābī, adding to the list of philosophers and translators, both Jewish and Arab, who had worked to create an Iberian school of philosophy, to which Ibn Ṭufayl was also an early contributor.[24] Maimonides' opinions on the Arabo-Andalusi philosophical tradition, reflected here in his advice to Ibn Tibbon, were tremendously important

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[23] For a discussion of Maimonides' use and knowledge of Jewish, Arabic and Christian philosophers, see Stroumsa, 24-29. See also note 26 below.

[24] While Maimonides does not cite Ibn Ṭufayl, Davidson (2005, 115-16) has speculated that Maimonides was aware of his work. The work did circulate among Jewish scholars in medieval Iberia. See note 5 above.

for subsequent generations of scholars and shaped the nature of Hebrew translation in the following centuries (Harvey 1992).[25]

Maimonides gives Ibn Tibbon his oft quoted advice about sense translation over word-for-word or literal translation. In his letter to Ibn Tibbon, Maimonides has very specific advise on the best type of translation, including an oft-quoted preference for sense translation over a more literal word for word translation.[26] He also underscores that the goal of all translation is the spread of knowledge ("And may God grant that the spread of knowledge among other communities of Israel be prompted by such works," 222). As Isidore Twersky shows, for Maimonides (as for Ibn Ṭufayl), language is "merely an instrument, a medium of communication with no self-transcending worth or metaphysical significance, and importance inhered exclusively in the subject matter being studied" (324-55). Maimonides' informs Ibn Tibbon that there is more to making a text accessible than simply translating it word for word—it requires making the text intelligible, which gestures to the idea of translating cultural differences and of the contextual contingency of meaning. Such context involved, as discussed below, the translation of texts dealing with philosophy and metaphysics written by Muslim and classical authors for a Jewish audience—notably the authorities whose translated works he refers to are Aristotle, Galen, Ibn Sīnā, and al-Fārābī. Steven Harvey has shown that in Samuel ibn Tibbon's personal copy of Maimonides' letter there is a final passage that was omitted in the copy he prepared for the community that includes further suggestions regarding the study of Aristotle (53). In this final passage Maimonides instructs Ibn Tibbon to use the commentaries (פירוש *perûš*) of Ibn Rushd: "The works of Aristotle are 'the foundations of all works on the sciences.' We can only understand Aristotle fully with the help of the commentators, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Themistius, and Averroes." (378-9, Constantinople ed.; English trans. 225).[27] Again Maimonides (or perhaps Ibn Tibbon or another transmitter who may have added this passage subsequently) underscores the role of the commentator/translator as facilitator and tool for developing one's personal intellect.

These thinkers—Aristotle, Themistius, Alexander of Aphrodesius, as well as Maimonides himself—are central as both inspirations of and as figures within an original work of imaginative fiction, the *Visión deleytable* (*Visión*), penned some 300 years later by a fifteenth-century converso author, Alfonso de la Torre.[28] De la Torre's fictional account of the metaphysical journey of the

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[25] See Mauro Zonta on the Influence of Arabic philosophy on Jewish thought. See also Pessin and Davidson (2005) concerning Muslim thought in the works of Maimonides. Davidson argues that Maimonides was deeply indebted to al-Ghazālī's work on Ibn Sīnā: "virtually every of a metaphysical character attributed by Maimonides to Aristotle but actually deriving from Avicenna was available to him through Ghazali" (2005, 115).

[26] "Let me premise one canon. Whoever wishes to translate, and proposes to render each word literally, and at the same time to adhere slavishly to the order of the words and sentences in the original, will meet with much difficulty; his rendering will be faulty and untrustworthy. This is not the right method. The translator should first try to grasp the sense of the subject thoroughly, and then state the theme with perfect clearness in the other language. This, however, can not be done without changing the order of the words, putting many words for one word, or *vice versa*, and adding or taking away words, so that the subject be perfectly intelligible in the language into which he translates. This method was followed by Honein ben Is'hak with the works of Galen, and his son Is'hak with the works of Aristotle. It is for this reason that all their versions are so peculiarly lucid, and therefore we ought to study them to the exclusion of all others. Your distinguished college ought to adopt this rule in all the translations undertaken for those honored men, and the heads of the congregation." (222)

[27] Here I cite Alexander Marx's 1935 Hebrew version and Marcus Nathan Adler's 1872 English translation.

[28] Alfonso de la Torre was a *converso* intellectual, educated at the University of Salamanca, who then served as courtier to the prince of Viana in Navarre, with whom he apparently traveled to the Aragonese court of Alfons V in Naples. A translation of the *Nichomachean Ethics* is also attributed to him. Notable in the *Visión* is the fact that it contains only one chapter—tacked on at the end—that mentions Christianity or Christian beliefs. It also exists in a Hebrew *aljamiado* version that lacks even this scant allusion to Christian belief. Hamilton, 4-8.

intellect, the *Visión deleytable*, is deeply indebted to the works of these thinkers of the Arabic and Jewish Andalusi tradition and it was a best seller found in all of the royal libraries of Iberia (Girón Negrón, 45-50; Hamilton, 6-8. The highly original account of the intellect's journey, during which he is aided by the allegorical figures of Wisdom, Truth, Virtue and Reason is the culmination of the preceding centuries of Iberian intellectual history and incorporates the positions of Maimonides with those of other seminal thinkers such as Isidore of Seville, the *Anticlaudianus*, Ibn Rushd, al-Ghazālī, al-Fārābī.[29]

Much as Ibn Ṭufayl had done with the ideas of Aristotle and Ibn Sīnā, Alfonso de la Torre in the *Visión* creates a fictionalized account of Andalusi philosophy and theology (including direct translations from passages of Maimonides' *Guide*) for speakers of Romance vernacular in the fifteenth century. The work's protagonist, Entendimiento, is told at the beginning of the work that God wants him to achieve "perfection," and that his questioning and doubting are the way that he will achieve his goal: "ca el dubdar ha saydo en grant causa de saber la verdad" (110-11). Like the perplexed Absal and the doubting scholars for whom Maimonides wrote the *Guide*, Entendimiento similarly seeks to make sense of what he has been taught of philosophy and religion.

His questioning allows Entendimiento to ascend the mountain of Wisdom and reach the celestial realm of glowing intelligibles—following in Aristotle's footsteps as depicted in Maimonides' letter to Samuel ibn Tibbon--learning first the Seven Liberal arts (or sciences) in a vernacular adaptation of several Latin, Arabic and Hebrew philosophical works, including Isidore's *Eymologies*, De Lille's *Anticlaudianus*, al-Ghazālī's *al-Maqāṣid al-falāsifiah*, Ibn Sīnā's *Al-Ilahiyyat* min *al-Shifa*' and Maimonides' *Guide* (Girón Negrón, 64-65, 84-92).

In his encounter with Grammar we are given a philosophy of language that does not privilege any language by linking it to a single religion or cosmology. Instead, Alfonso de la Torre focuses on language as a tool of this world, stressing that language, any language, is necessary for man to communicate.

> Una lengua non es al omne más natural que otra, e por tanto yerran los que dizen que dexando al omne solo desde la creación suya que fablaría caldeo; e esto non es verdad, ca lo contrario vemos en las bárbaras naçiones. Verdad sea que la naturaleza instiga al omne buscar manera de entenderse con otro o por señales o gritos o sylabos o palabras, pero estas maneras todas son en el mundo. Yten, notorio es que la lengua caldayca es lenguaje perfecto e çierto es que la naturaleza del omne comiença por aquello que es más ynmperfecto e más confuso; pues ¿cómo pueden ellos dezir que una lengua sea más natural que otra? (112)

Here, in what seems like a fifteenth-century echo of early Mu'tazlite thinkers, as well as the role given language in *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, the author states that man's nature begins in a confused and imperfect state and evolves into perfection, so the idea that Man received a perfect language at the beginning that has since devolved is erroneous. It also suggests that languages evolve, becoming ever better through usage.

But like Ḥayy at the beginning of his tale, Entendimiento has no language although he has not yet achieved union/with God as Ḥayy had. The narrator's intellect begins his journey in the

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[29] Ibn Ṭufayl is not cited nor does he appear as a character in the *Visión*, but several scholars have pointed out the similarities between the two works. Both allegorize "the systemic apprehension of physical and metaphysical truths by unassisted human reason" (Girón Negrón, 39-40). Carreras y Artau (2:591) believe Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān was the inspiration for the *Visión*. Girón Negrón does not find any proof of this, but does not rule it out (40).

realm of Wisdom realizing how difficult his path will be, particularly because he does not know the language: "asy por la fatigaçion de la trabajosa jornada como por la ynorançia de la fabla de aquesta tierra, estavan puestos en congoxas çercana a desperaçion" (107). The land is that of universal wisdom and divine truths, but without the "language of the land," his path is shrouded in dense fog and appears quite difficult. So he learns his first lessons from the allegorical figure Grammar, who, as Absal did with Ḥayy, instructs him in the language he will need: "començóle a mostrar de fablar [. . .] E después que ya el niño entendía los términos del razonar" (108). He continues to refine his speech with Logic and Rhetoric. The latter informs him that men of science need a different language than that of the "masses":

> Ca non sería Bueno que el çiente e el ydiota oviesen manera común en la fabla, nin sería honesto los secretos çientíficos de todo presçio exçelente fuesen traydos en menospreçio por palabras vulgares. E aún por esto no sola mente fue neçesario el fablar secrestado e apartado del vulgo, mas aún fue neçesario paliar e encobrir aquéllos con fiçión e diversos géneros de fablas e figuras. E esto non sola mente usaron en el Sacro Eloquio los elegidos e profetas e sabios, mas aún aquellos que quisieron ocultar los naturales secretos a los plebeos. (127)

Here De la Torre further weaves into his narrative the earlier Arabo- and Judeo-Andalusi idea of allegorical language as that by which metaphysical truths should be translated for the masses (that we have noted in the works of Ibn Ṭufayl and Maimonides). Expressing metaphysical truths in the language of the "masses" is a form of translation, by which they are debased ("traydos en menospreçio"). The translator/interpreter's job is not to translate them directly, which would be harmful, but to couch or hide them in stories and parables.

De la Torre himself is undertaking such a process of translation. On the one hand, he is translating the works of Maimonides, al-Ghazālī and others into Castilian, and on the other, incorporating them into a fictional narrative possibly inspired by Ibn Ṭufayl 's twelfth-century allegory.[30] As a narrative, the *Visión* is just the type of parable or story in which metaphysical truths should be couched in or into which they should be translated or expressed according to both Ibn Ṭufayl and Maimonides. This fifteenth-century Castilian tale is a vehicle by which these scholars' ideas were incorporated into the libraries of all the Iberian monarchs. Via Alfonso de la Torre's *Visión*, fifteenth-century Romance-speaking readers could encounter, through the allegorical figure/protagonist Entendimiento, the sections of Maimonides' *Guide* dealing with the metaphysical and moral secrets. These are revealed at the top of the mountain of Wisdom, and according to Salinas Espinosa, De la Torre offers an almost verbatim account of sections of the *Guide*, making him the second Castilian translator of the *Guide*—the other being Pedro de Toledo who produced a translation for Gómez Suárez de Figueroa (34-35).[31] Several of the passages of the *Visión deleytable* are direct translations of the *Guide* that do not correspond to Pedro de Toledo's translation.[32]

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[30] See note 29 above.

[31] Pedro de Toledo entitled his translation *Mostrador y enseñador de enturbiados*. It is available in Moshe Lazar's modern edition. See also Fernández López.

[32] I give here some of Salinas Espinosa's examples (36):
Pedro de Toledo: Prinçipio primero es que eser de cosa grande infinita es falso. (*Mostrador*, 195)
Alfonso de la Torre: Cierto es—dixo la Verdat—que no ay cosa de cantydad ynfinita. (156)
Pedro de Toledo: Prinçipio segundo: que esser de cosas infinitas es falso, conque sean su esser todo en uno. (195)

Alfonso de la Torre's debt to Maimonides goes beyond the sections of the *Guide* included in the knowledge Entendimiento gains, and includes the rationale for the entire work. The reader encounters, with the protagonist, Entendimiento, allusions to (and sometimes a vivid exchange with) the authorities and luminaries of each of the sciences he masters, including, in the palaces of Sabieza, Razón and Natura, the supposed authorities on metaphysics or the science of nature and God, namely Jupiter, Alexander of Aphrodisius, the philosophers of the Arabic and Judeo-Andalusi tradition, Al-Fārābī, al-Ġazālī, Avicenna, Maimonides, and Ibn Rushd (De la Torre, 107-137; 150, 211; Salinas Espinosa, 43). After mastering the Liberal Arts, Entendimiento is forced to prove he is worthy to enter into the supralunar world. His response to Reason's grilling is that he is prepared to accept the truth from whosoever presents it, noting that no one creed has a monopoly over the divine truths: "non me moverá más la verdad dicha por boca de cristiano, que de judío o moro o gentil, sy verdades sean todas, nin negaré menos la falsya dicha por boca de uno que de boca de otro" (146). As we have seen, Arabo- and Judeo-Andalusi thinkers such as Ibn Ṭufayl and Maimonides, the truth has been transmitted and translated by thinkers in a variety of languages—from Greek to Arabic to Hebrew to Castilian. While that truth may be an essence (the divine itself) that essence is not something that most people can experience and which can be fully captured or expressed in language. Far from being a way to unearth or fashion a bag of gold that can be passed from civilization to civilization as the *translatio studii* or *emperii* models suggest, translation, like language, is a tool that should be used to craft imperfect and incomplete representations of divine truth (akin to the tarnishing, dimming or even misrepresentation of a pure gold) that is always and necessarily beyond language. For Ibn Ṭufayl, Maimonides and De la Torre, the act of translation involved more than the expression of an idea in a different language—it involved the expression of a universal truth in the always inadequate imagery and rhetorical expressions of human language. As such, all philosophers and thinkers who attempt to communicate divine truths struggle at translation, which will always be an imperfect approximation of a truth whose fullness of meaning lays, by nature, beyond speech.

Alfonso de la Torre: La segunda propusyçion—dixo la Verdad—es ésta: poner cuerpos de çyerta cantydad ynfinitos en número, es ynposyble, sy dizen que sean en un tiempo, asy como los que ponían los átomos ser prinçipios de todas las cosas. (156)

Salinas Espinosa claims that in those passages translated are far superior to those of Pedro de Toledo (37).

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