

**This text is a pre-print version of:**

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# Kirmen Uribe and translation:

## An endless journey<sup>1</sup>

### 1 Introductory words: Kirmen Uribe, travel and translation

In order to begin this study, we would like to emphasize the existent nexus between Uribe and translation. We would like to recall that, making metaphorical use of language or using parallelisms, the translator's task has been equated on repeated occasions with travel or with the transportation of texts. The word itself that means the act of translation in Basque, *itzultzea*, is the image of return on a round trip: it is, specifically, a question of a succession of steps which have to be taken in order to return after having left.

Returning to the mention of borderland spaces, we would like to recall, likewise, that translators have often been termed mediators between frontiers; as such, we would like to underscore the fact that such mediation is, as well as linguistic, also cultural and political (and, as we will see in the following analysis, the writer that is the object of our study is acutely aware of that). Moreover, one should remember that fictional translators have also been represented as travelers (Delabastita & Grutman 2005, 11–34) and that,

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among other things, it is typical to hear or read that a translator is a guide, a travel guide, a carrier that takes travelers, healthy and safe, from one riverbank to the other or that guides authors in their journeys abroad. Uribe also articulates these latter ideas, expressed in phrases like: “The translators themselves encourage translation” or “The translator acts as a bridge or as a driving force” (Uribe 2013).

Therefore, what does Uribe say about translation? What is translation for him? What is it that is transported, from where and where to, by Uribe as a translator or by means of his translations? In what follows, we will attempt to reveal the characteristics of Uribe’s endless translation journey,<sup>2</sup> as we did in the case of other authors (see Ibarluzea 2016 and Gandara & Ibarluzea 2018). In effect, Uribe has taken a route made up of many paths in the terrain of translation: he reads translations, he makes use of them as a tool for his writing process, he has translated on various occasions both his own texts as well as those of other writers, he has been in contact with the translators of his texts, and he has fictionalized translators. We will explain all that here and, in order to do so, we will take as our starting point Uribe’s responses to a questionnaire on the topic (Uribe 2013).<sup>3</sup> In addition to those responses, we will include other kinds of notes, interpretations, and what critics and translators have said and written about him. In the same vein, we will also analyze several passages in the novel *Mussche* (2012) in which he places a translator in the story, in order to link him to the writer’s own thought process. In other words, we will try to reveal Uribe’s translation habitus.

## 2 Kirmen Uribe’s translation habitus: discourses, positions, and experiences

Uribe and his translators form part of a structure that makes up the transnational, multi-directional, and relatively autonomous sub-field of Basque literature in translation (Ibarluzea 2017, chapter 3). They are agents in a specific social environment and they adopt specific positions and attitudes, in other words, a specific habitus:<sup>4</sup> they are

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<sup>2</sup> This study is useful in order to understand the sub-field of Basque literature in translation and the dynamics that occur therein.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated, references to Uribe’s comments here are taken from that interview.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on habitus in Basque, see Ibarluzea 2017, chap. 2. In any event, habitus may be defined briefly in the following terms: it is a virtual situation that is felt profoundly in a specific body which, in one way or another, makes it react (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 28). In other words, it is a kind of

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conditioned by the features of Basque literature and translation models, subject to the authority of the forces therein, but, at the same time, they too build and nourish that model, as well as its development and representation.

In general, we can say that, like other writers who live in plurilingual spaces, translation is very close to Uribe's experience and he coincides with the approach of writers who increasingly divide their time between original creative and translation work (Ibarluzea 2015). Uribe is from a generation of writers who completed their basic education in Basque, and like the other writers of that generation, Basque has been his creative language from the very beginning (ibid.). Uribe is also comfortable in Spanish, and he also feels it as his own language, but when it comes to writing he chooses Basque, his literary language: "I have not had to choose my literary language, the language already chose me when I was born" (in Perret 2014). This is a common issue in the field of Basque literature, since, as some observers have explained previously, such as Manterola (2011), literary bilingualism is not typical among Basque writers. As well as Basque and Spanish, Uribe also has some knowledge of English, and in different interviews he has said that he reads Italian, Catalan, Galician, and French.

In Uribe's own words, he has had "a very long relationship" with translation "of all kinds": on the one hand, he has done translations (of his texts and those of others) and, on the other hand, other translators have translated his texts, and he has followed those projects closely. As a matter of fact, through translations of his works, Uribe has entered into both national and international spaces. As Professor Sally Perret (2017, 26) explains, Uribe has also managed to enter into the Chinese- and English-language markets, both difficult to gain a foothold in. It is even more difficult for a writer in a small language to go down that route, as Perret makes clear (2017, 24), as Casanova and Olaziregi state, gaining an international projection is more difficult for writers from the periphery. It is worth noting, however, that Uribe won the Spanish National Literature Prize for Narrative

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universal grammar, a system of internalized attitudes which have to do with someone's perceptions, thoughts, discourses, actions, and practices. In the same way, it is also a creative schema which makes one respond or act in one way or another in the face of different situations, since subjects usually act according to an interiorized schema. Whatever the case, the habitus is not fixed, it varies according to a specific situation and according to the directions taken by subjects; thus, the habitus is connected to both habits and improvised responses. The habitus is dual in several senses: it interiorizes and exteriorizes; it is collective and personal; and it articulates individuality and sociability (ibid.).

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by means of a translated version of his work. In that case, contends Perret (2017, 28), instead of seeing translation as an exercise in domestication, it should be understood also as a political act and one should also bear in mind the liberating effects of translation.

As well as being a translator and a writer of texts that are translated, Uribe is also a reader of translations. He says: “I read more works translated into Basque than written originally in the language. I’d say that most of my reading is in translation. It’s an important fact because it also has an effect on my writing.” In effect, there is much to learn from translators: “Translators help to spruce up Basque and raise the level of Basque. Our style has also been influenced, [because] we would write a lot more coarsely [without it]. A translator offers you a lot of solutions so that you can then write.” In that vein, translation is for Uribe “a learning method,” and he uses the corpus of texts translated into Basque as a consultation tool in his writing process. That is what he said in an interview after completing the novel *Mussche*: “In order to write *Mussche*, I read a lot of novels translated into Basque, and that also had an influence. *Pereirak dioenez* [*Pereira Maintains*], *Elurra* [*Snow*], *Loti Ederra* [*Sleeping Beauty*] . . . Natalia Ginzburg . . . What’s more, I kept some books by my side, on the table, and consulted them frequently.” He confesses to being self-taught in the field of translation, and that he also started on his own account when he was young, yet he would not define himself as a translator. While he is a member of the Basque writers’ association, he is not in the translators’ association. In any event, he knows many Basque translators, some of whom are friends. He says, “I also admire some of them. I’m also a fan of some of them.” In effect, some translators “get a following. You see who has translated a text and you say: ‘this is well translated.’ ” Asked about his general opinion on translation into Basque, Uribe is “very positive,” and he believes it has had a major influence on writers of his generation, above all because texts that translators have rendered in Basque offer a great number of solutions to the choice of language when it comes to writing.

As stated above, Uribe has translated his own and others’ texts; he has been a self-translator as well as a translator.<sup>5</sup> As regards his texts, he worked with Gerardo Markuleta

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<sup>5</sup> The information on translations cited here comes mainly from the EIZIE (Euskal Itzultzaile, Zuzentzaile eta Interpreteen Elkarte, Association of Translators, Correctors and Interpreters of Basque Language) database *Nor da Nor* (Who is Who). On occasion, though, in order to clarify something, other sources have been consulted.

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and Ana Arregi on the Spanish translation of the book of poems *Bitartean heldu eskutik* (*Mientras tanto dame la mano*). It was first published in 2004, and then again in 2008,<sup>6</sup> 2010, and 2013, all four editions being bilingual (in Basque and Spanish). The texts in that collection were also used in other projects.<sup>7</sup> In 2004, Uribe himself translated his children's and young adult literature work *Ez naiz ilehoria, eta zer?* (I'm Not Blonde, So What?, 2004) into Spanish: *No soy rubia* (La Galera, Barcelona). Moreover, his poems, alongside those of other authors, were translated into Spanish for the 2006 anthology *Montañas en la niebla: Poesía vasca de los años 90* (Mountains in the Fog: Basque Poetry of the 90s), with the translation coordinated by Ana Arregi.

As noted, Uribe has also been a translator for other authors. He translated three of Raymond Carver's poems in the book *Ulamarine*—"Balsa Wood" ("Baltza-ohola"), "Jean's TV" ("Jeanen telebista"), and "Bonnard's Nudes" ("Bonnarden biluziak")—from English into Basque, which were published in numbers 15/16 of the journal *Hegats* (1997). Prior to the poems, which appear in both the original English and in Basque translation, Uribe also pens a short introduction for each. After the poems there is a list of Carver's poetry books (as well as his work published in French and Spanish), which also includes the book *Katedrala* (*Cathedral*, 1983), translated into Basque by J.M. Mendizabal. That same year, Uribe published another translation in numbers 17/18 of the same journal, *Hegats*, an edition that included nine poems by the Nobel-Prize-winning Polish poet, Wisława Szymborska, translated into Basque by Kirmen Uribe, Rikardo Arregi Diaz de Heredia, and Magdalena Węgrzyn ("Ahizparen laudorioa eta beste zenbait poema"). Here, some introductory words were also included, and the translators remark that, in addition to the original texts, they also utilized their translations into Spanish, French, and English.<sup>8</sup> As in the previous example, the poems are published in two

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<sup>6</sup> In editions thereafter it was titled *Mientras tanto cógeme la mano*, because it was felt that the verb 'coger' (take) was a more precise rendering of 'heldu' than 'dar' (give).

<sup>7</sup> Preparatory works carried out for the first edition appeared on the [basqueliterature.com](http://basqueliterature.com) website in 2002. Most of the poems included by Perret in the 2014 anthology *Kirmen Uribe Vidas y Ficciones* are in that collection. Likewise, the Spanish version of the 2016 text *Ezin esan* (One Cannot Say), titled *No se puede decir*, was included in an itinerary designed by Esther Ferrer as part of the Donostia/San Sebastián, European Capital of Culture 2016 project.

<sup>8</sup> "Rikardo Arregi and I really loved Szymborska, and that's why we translated her. I used Spanish and English, Rikardo French, and Magdalena translated them directly from Polish. In the translation we did, we took into account the original and the three translations" (Kirmen Uribe, personal communication).

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languages (Polish and Basque) followed by bibliographical data. In 2004 Uribe also took part in group work at a translation workshop in Estonia:<sup>9</sup> “Each of us translated the others’ poems into our native tongue.”<sup>10</sup> Lastly, one can cite Uribe’s translated work at the *armiarma.eus* website: in 2011 (the same year Tomas Tranströmer won the Nobel Prize), in the “Euskarari ekarriak” (Translated into Basque) section at this site, Uribe published a collection of his poems titled “Zeru amaitu gabea eta beste poema batzuk” (“The Half-Finished Heaven and Some Other Poems”, Swedish to Basque),<sup>11</sup> comprised of “Zeru amaitu gabea” (“The Half-Finished Heaven”), “Bekoz beko” (“Face to Face”), “Goizeko txoriak” (“Morning Birds”), “Izena” (“The Name”), “79ko martxoan” (“March ’79”), “Oroimenaren ikuspegia” (“Memories Look at Me”), “Apirila eta isiltasuna” (“April and Silence”), and “Haikuak” (“Haiku Poems”).<sup>12</sup> Then, in 2014 and at the same website, Uribe also translated Mark Strand’s poem “Elegy for My Father” as “Aitaren eresia.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to all this, Uribe has also used his translations of other people’s poems in recitals and his other texts.

Not all of Uribe’s translations have been published, and he himself has said that he did them as a kind of exercise in order to learn how to do so, as mentioned above: “Above all in poetry, I noted how the problems that emerged in other authors’ poems were resolved in Basque.” Put another way, for Uribe translation is an exercise in training to write:

I asked myself: How would Plath write in Basque? Or how would Carver write in Basque? That’s how I have translated several authors, from several languages.

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<sup>9</sup> With Benno Barnard (Flanders), Sigurdur Pálsson (Iceland), Cathal Ó Searcaigh (Ireland), Jan Erik Vold (Norway), Robert Alan Jamieson (Scotland / Shetland Islands), Mererid Puw Davies (Wales), and Doris Kareva, Kalju Kruusa, and Hasso Krull (all from Estonia).

<sup>10</sup> One of the poets who took part in the workshop, Robert Alan Jamieson, discusses the experience here: <http://www.estlit.ee/centre/index.php?mact=News,cntnt01,detail,0&cntnt01articleid=20&cntnt01origid=27&cntnt01returnid=27> [December 28, 2020].

<sup>11</sup> In order to translate Tranströmer, Uribe used the Spanish versions of his poems. “I knew of Tranströmer before he won the Nobel Prize, and when they gave him the award, I wrote about him in *Berria*” (Kirmen Uribe, personal communication).

<sup>12</sup> The following year, the translator Juan Mari Aguirreureta published a collection of Tranströmer’s poems, *Bizientzat eta hilentzat. Poema guztiak, 1954-2004* (Elkar, 2012), which were translated prior to those that Uribe translated. Aguirreureta’s translations are, therefore, other versions.

<sup>13</sup> Uribe used the original English-language version to translate Strand (Kirmen Uribe, personal communication).

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And it has been a very intimate, private, activity. I've published them, but they have been above all tests and trials, exercises to learn how to write. Translation has served me as a means to write, as an exercise or as training.

Asked about translation strategies, Uribe observes that he does not like to take too many liberties. Here he is above all alluding to poems: "A poem has its moment, and I do not like a version that is very different from the original. The translator must respect the moment at which the poem was born, whether the poem is that of the translator or someone else." Moreover, as regards the language register, one tries to maintain the poetic spirit, to reconstruct the rhythm and musicality. Likewise, one tries to "purify" texts: "In other words, instead of the poem becoming very cryptic in relation to the original, I try to use a well-lubricated Basque. In the end, the writer writes clearly in their language and in ours, too, it must appear clear. The poems must appear as if they had been written in Basque." In Uribe's view, "translation is a creative exercise," and it is not the same to translate your own text and someone else's. "When one does it oneself, they rewrite it. Translation is a lot like creative work, and in the end, literature comes from deep inside, also a lot through intuition, and not everything is rational. Thus, the translator must go deep into those abysses again and look for a new, although similar, rhythm."

When his texts have been translated into other languages, Uribe notes that he has had two options: in poetry translations, when he has had some knowledge of the language in question, he has taken part in the translation: "I have also taken part in poetry translations. The language of the poems is very important for me, and I took part in the Spanish translation of the poetry book *Bitartean heldu eskutik (Meanwhile Hold my Hand)*. Of course, when it came to French I did not participate, but I did in the English-language version, I flicked through it. I did not take part in the Russian and other versions." The French version of this book, translated by Kattalin Totorika, was published in Bordeaux in 2006 by the Le Castor Astral publishing house. The English-language version of the text, published in the United States in 2007 by Graywolf Press, was translated by Elizabeth Macklin.<sup>14</sup> The Russian version, translated by Roman Ignatiev,

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<sup>14</sup> This was a finalist for the 2007 PEN American Center award for the best work translated into English in the United States.

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was published in Moscow by the Gernika Press in 2010.<sup>15</sup> That same year, in 2010, the Proa publishing house in Barcelona published an anthology in Catalan, edited by Jon Elordi and Laia Nogera, which included Uribe's poems in *Bitartean heldu eskutik* as well as several unpublished poems from his recitals. As on other occasions (and we will return to the issue later) Uribe praises the mediatory role of translators when he mentions this work:

The translation team did a great job, not in publishing it because I found the publishing house, but in the talks and readings they gave. That makes me realize that literature, especially narrative, is a business. One can get out there with grants, but the relationship with a publishing house is very commercial. That said, thanks to translators one can establish another kind of relationship, another kind of publication, other kinds of circles, more human, and still maybe reach a bigger audience, one thing doesn't rule out the other.

That human circle or relationship, and the writer-translator connection, is a very typical one which happens in both directions between Uribe and his translators. In the words of the translator Nami Kaneko, "The chance to meet the author himself in person has also had a big influence on me: I think that the experience I've had with him, in conversations both in the Basque Country and in Japan, have helped me a lot in developing a more intimate relationship with both Basque and Basque literature" (Kaneko 2018). In effect, Kaneko agrees with Uribe in believing that personal relationships help to create other kinds of circles. "I totally agree with Kirmen on that subject. To put it one way, in the world of literature those that create and organize translations are not the invisible hands of the market, but the hands of people who are involved in the translation and publishing process (agents, people who work in publishing and in bookshops, readers, critics . . .)" (Kaneko 2018). An example of these circles and collectives is the fact that translations into certain languages are always carried out by the same translators.

Uribe believes that not having to use a bridge language and being able to translate directly from Basque into other languages represents progress. As regards this, it seems

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<sup>15</sup> This translation was done via the bridge language of Spanish.



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worth highlighting that in the case of the book of poems, *Bitartean heldu eskutik*, almost all the translations were done from Basque.

I'm also very happy about something else: when it came to translating *Bitartean heldu eskutik*, I tried to find translators who would do so directly from Basque. For example, Elizabeth Macklin translated it into English, and always from Basque, without the bridge language of Spanish. We've come a long way in that too. With *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, it was a case of many translations being done from Spanish. But with publishers I have always stood up for, if possible, looking for a translator who knows Basque. That happened to me with Japanese. *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao* is in thirteen languages, and when it came to translating it into Japanese, for example, it was done so from Basque.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, as regards subordination to linguistic dominance (in this case, that of Spanish), the words of translator and researcher Nami Kaneko are worth noting. "I think that there is a lesson to learn here: indirect translation should not be completely ruled out, because sometimes it acts like a bridge" (Kaneko and Manterola 2016, 10). Moreover, Kaneko thinks that "those in contact with a major language have an advantage in being able to achieve recognition in that language and, thanks to that, in being disseminated in many other languages too" and "one must make the most of that, even though it may create some other problems" (ibid., 26–27). Meanwhile, one should remember what kinds of strategies are used in order to highlight or suppress territoriality, because they can alter the function of translation (Ibarluzea and Olaziregi, 2016). Thus, we believe it necessary to underscore the fact that different editions of Uribe's poems are bilingual, or that editions of the same work by him in different languages have been published, as part of a strategy to demonstrate territoriality. As such, we agree with Kaneko when she states that "what most conditions the fact that Basque literature is spread through Spanish is, precisely, the view one has of that literature" (Kaneko and Manterola 2016, 15), and not so much the language in which we approach it. In Kaneko's opinion, if direct translation

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<sup>16</sup> On the question of bridge languages, translation strategies, and the document called "vulgata" that writers passed on to translators, see Kaneko and Manterola (2016).

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from Basque becomes merely a symbolic act, it loses value and she thinks it better to do “something that will be reflected in the result of and reception for the translation” (ibid., 25).

In the case of his narrative work, Uribe does not take part in the translation (except to answer translators’ questions) and he explains that he has always opted for Basque translators:

In all the other cases, with the novels, I opted in favor of the translator. I don’t translate my own work, even though I know Spanish and English. It is an option, 1) in favor of Basque, because Basque is my only literary language and 2) in favor of the translator, because I believe there are good translators and that they do good work. That should be backed, I think.

Markuleta did the last one, and he did a great job of translating *Mussche*, much better than me. So, why would I do it? I know Spanish, yes, but in my case, I don’t self-translate in spite of being bilingual. The novelist David Crossman told me the same thing, that he just writes in Hebrew, even though he knows English well. I think that we need to normalize all that too, we write in Basque and then a translator transforms it into Spanish, English, French . . . into whatever language. (. . .) I tried with *Mussche*, and in the end I managed to make it a normal process: [the publishing house] Seix Barral made up a contract to publish *Mussche*, and they hired Markuleta. It wasn’t a case of me doing it and telling them, all my doing. I was very firm on that point: “Deal with me as if I were German” I told them, “You hire a translator.” I think it must have been one of the first times we achieved something like that: that a commercial publishing house hired a paid Basque-Spanish translator, with them paying, without any subsidy.

Today, one can read the novel *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao* in Basque (2008) and fourteen other languages.<sup>17</sup> We can read *Mussche*, meanwhile, in Basque (2012), Spanish (2013,

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<sup>17</sup> Specifically, in Galician (2010, trans. Isaac Xubín); Catalan (2010, trans. Pau Joan Hernández); Spanish (2010, trans. Ana Arregi Martínez); Portuguese (2011, trans. Pedro Vidal, revised by Clara Joana Vitorino); French (2012, trans. Gersende Camenen); Bulgarian (2012, via bridge language Spanish, trans. Boriana

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trans. Gerardo Markuleta), Catalan (2013, trans. Pau Joan Hernández), Japanese (2015, trans. Nami Kaneko)<sup>18</sup> and Chinese (2015, trans. Huang Yehua). On the topic of translations of *Mussche*, Uribe commented, “In the case of *Mussche*, they all did so from Basque. In that regard, we’re making progress.” In the case of Chinese, we should be clear, the translation was done from Spanish. As the Japanese translator Nami Kaneko states, “From what I have heard in China, *Mussche* was translated from Spanish, the title appeared in Spanish, not Basque, on the front cover, and it was presented as a new publication in Spanish literature” (Kaneko and Manterola 2016, 15).

Kaneko herself has always made an effort to make sure Uribe appears as a Basque writer in contemporary literature collections and to underscore his distinctiveness (ibid.).

As regards *Elkarrekin esnatzeko ordua* (The Hour of Waking Together, 2016), the following translations are available: in Spanish (2016, trans. José María Isasi), Catalan (2016, trans. Pau Joan Hernández), Portuguese (2017, trans. Artur Gerra & Cristina Rodríguez), Galician (2017, trans. Isaac Xubin) and French (2018, trans. *Edurne Alegria*).<sup>19</sup>

*In the field of children’s and young adult literature, besides Spanish (2004), Uribe’s aforementioned Ez naiz ilehoria, eta zer? (2004) has been translated into Galician (2004, trans. Hadrián Laureira), Catalan (2004),<sup>20</sup> and Asturian (2004, trans. Carlos González Espina). Moreover, Nere Lete translated Garmendia eta zaldun beltza (2003) into English (as Garmendia and the Black Rider, 2015).*

*The audio-visual project Bar Puerto is trilingual: it was translated into Spanish by José María Isasi and into English by Elizabeth Macklin (2010).*

*Lastly, translations of Uribe’s poetry have been published in English and German in several anthologies and on various websites: In 2006, ten of Uribe’s poems (four of*

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*Dukova*); Japanese (2012, trans. Nami Kaneko); Russian (2013, via bridge language Spanish, trans. Roman Ignatiev & Zoia Khibrikova); Georgian (2013, via bridge language Spanish, trans. Vladimir Luarsabishvili); Albanian (2013, trans. Bashkim Shenu); 2013, Serbian (via bridge language Spanish, trans. Zorica Novakov-Kovacevic); English (2014, trans. Elizabeth Macklin); Slovenian (2014, via bridge language Spanish, trans. Marjeta Drobnič); and Estonian (2017, trans. Merelin Kotta).

<sup>18</sup> It received the award for the best translation into Japanese. For more information on this, see Kaneko and Manterola (2016).

<sup>19</sup> As we write this chapter, there are plans to translate the work into Serbian, Greek, Japanese, and English. Likewise, Asier Altuna will make a film based on the book and titled *KarmeLe* (Kirmen Uribe, personal communication).

<sup>20</sup> We do not have any information about the translator.

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*them translated by Petra Newiger and the remaining six by Ludger Damm*)<sup>21</sup> appeared on the Berlin website *Lyrikline*. In 2007, his work appeared in the book *Six Basque Poets*, translated by *Amaia Gabantxo*.<sup>22</sup> And in 2008, the US critics Kevin Prufer and Wayne Millar included three of Uribe's poems in their anthology *New European Poetry*.

It is worth pointing out that many of these translations have been undertaken thanks to the promotional efforts of local agents in the field of Basque literature and thanks to public subsidies, and that is another of the distinctive features of the sub-field of Basque literature in translation (Ibarluzea 2017). In any event, Uribe has not just moved around in those local circles and, as we saw in the previous quote, he has made an effort to function as if writing in the major languages and also to be present in commercial publishing houses and circles. In that vein, Nami Kaneko's position coincides with that of Uribe:

In the same sense, the kind of publishing house and collection in which the translation is published is, I think, really important. To tell the truth, I don't think it's such a good idea to publish translations in the academic world or in specialized Basque literature collections; here, in Japan, although I've received offers like that, I haven't been keen to do it. It's a personal opinion, and I won't deny the importance, for example, of publishing with the University of Nevada or a German publishing house, but I have my doubts, because they are aimed at a very limited kind of reader (. . .) It's important to publish books, but I'd give (and I do give) priority to aiming for the greatest number of readers possible. That's why I've always tried to carve out a path in the commercial world (even though it's in the extremely small market of literature in translation), so that works by Basque writers may be published by important publishing houses, in one of those collections that readers of literature in translation are interested in. (Kaneko and Manterola 2016, 22)

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<sup>21</sup> The texts, translations and audios can be accessed here: <https://www.lyrikline.org/es/poemas/kukua-3072?showmodal=de>

<sup>22</sup> All the poetry translations by Gabantxo are new in this anthology, and therefore different from those of Macklin (Kirmen Uribe, personal communication).

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As regards the motivations to translate Uribe, clearly the Spanish National Prize has helped to raise his profile and awareness of his work (Kaneko herself found out about the novel *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao* as a result of the prize), yet translators also point out other features. For example, Uribe's Georgian translator, Vladimir Luarsabishvili, highlights the exchange between minority literatures and the universality of a writer's work (2016, 136–139): "Uribe avoids addressing the typical Basque subject matter; on the contrary, he uses that to develop certain values, and those are equally attractive to Basque, German, English and readers of any nationality."

Kaneko also felt the same kind of connection: she felt a link between the effects of recent events (the earthquake and tsunamis) on Japanese coastal towns and the stories in the novel *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao* (Kaneko and Manterola 2016, 27). Similarly, like the Georgian translator, in Kaneko's opinion too, promoting Basque-language translations "could create their own relationships and new dialogues" (ibid., 7).

The translator Edurne Alegria also felt a bond with Uribe's latest novel, because she knew the events and characters portrayed: Alegria was born in exile, and knew the Urresti Letamendia family personally (Alegria 2018).

It appears, then, that the local and global nature of the themes Uribe explores (or a combination of both) is one of the bases in strengthening the connection between him and his translators. Additionally, it is worth noting too that there is a direct relationship between the writer and the translators. In effect, as noted above, Uribe gives a lot of importance to the relationships he shares with translators because they help him develop other more human ways to reach readers:

What I have learned from my relationships with translators is that there are many directions, not just the commercial route, but also the route of those who love literature, and that is how translators fall in love with a book and promote it. (. . .) And they do so because of literature (. . .) Loyalties also emerge and groups of translators are created around one writer. That is lovely (. . .) Think about it, for example, *Bitartean heldu eskutik* would not have been published in English if there had been no translator (. . .) Translators have been very important when it comes to helping me, in encouraging and persuading publishers (. . .) That's why

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relationships with translators are wonderful. They often do more work than an agent, and in the end, publishers know a translator, like they were family, and they trust them. There is trust in an agent but one knows that it's a commercial relationship, and so on. If a translator promotes the book, there is a greater chance it will get published. That has been very nice for me.

Specifically, the nature of the leading character in Uribe's novel *Mussche* (a translator himself) is an attempt to show the human side of a translator and, to put it one way, Uribe reconstructs in his fiction opinions about translators.

### 3 Kirmen Uribe's habitus reflected in the role of the translator

Perret contends that one of the key features of Uribe's literature is its human side (2014, 7): "What most stands out in Uribe's work, as well as its originality and innovative spirit, is his peaceful worldview and his positive position in defending the human in all its complexity." Moreover, the topic of translators in fiction is not new, although we appear to have experienced a boom in Basque literature in recent years (Ibarluzea 2017, chap. 5),<sup>23</sup> and, at the same time, the so-called fictional turn has enriched research in translation studies. This last reflection must, therefore, be situated in that line of research, on the understanding that what is fictionalized is a representation of writers' habitus, and that it is valid when it comes to both describing the subfield of Basque literature in translation and expressing perceptions about it (ibid.).

*Mussche* begins in Belgium in 1937 with the story of the child war refugee Karmentxu Cundin, and then Uribe leads us from the Spanish Civil War to the context of the Second World War, specifically to that of the Flemish writer and translator Robert Mussche (who took Karmentxu Cundin into his home at a young age). Uribe says the following about the character of Robert Mussche:

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<sup>23</sup> Therein, several fictional translators that have appeared in contemporary Basque literature are studied, following the notion of the fictional turn and comparing the image of the role of Basque translators with those of other literatures.

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Each of us chooses our characters, whatever they are like, and each chooses what they offer you in the novel. Then they are adapted. Although Mussche was a real person with certain real biographical data, most of it is made up. As regards being a translator . . . To tell the truth, that is what sparked my interest in starting the novel. Who was Mussche? Well, he was a Flemish translator that took in a Basque child. The fact he was a translator, that he spoke different languages, attracted me a lot.

The translator is a very attractive character, humble, in the shadows, they recover the universal literary tradition. The writer is more egotistical . . . You won't believe it, but I like translators more, it's lovely sharing the voices of others.

Specifically, in the last chapter of the novel, the author himself makes an appearance in the story, and he offers a synthesis of the leading character's nature, as well as justifying his reasons for writing the novel<sup>24</sup>:

Our daughter Arane was born on 28 November 2010. My friend Aitzol died on 24 April 2011. One of the last times we were together this is what Aitzol said to me:

“You should tell the story of a hero.”

“But there are no heroes for me. I like the fragile side of people, not their feats. I'm scared of heroes.”

“I'm not speaking about those kinds of heroes. I'm speaking about normal people. Heroes are all around us, before and now, here and all over the world; small heroes, those that devote themselves to helping others.”

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<sup>24</sup> All the english quotes of *Mussche* are our translations, as the novel has not been translated into english.

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Then I fell silent. Now I agree with him. There are heroes all around who, once they've been developed, pass away.

So, there's the story of a hero, my beloved friend. (Uribe 2012, 194)

The translator is an everyday hero and, therefore, for Uribe, suitable for demonstrating the fragile side of his characters. Here, too, as Thiem (1995) observed, the translator is far from being on par with the "Conan the Translator" hero. Yet, as Uribe explains, contemporary society acknowledges all kinds of heroes, and translators can also become heroes. The changing definition of the "hero" concept leads in some way to a change in the image of translators themselves. Furthermore, rejecting Thiem's contention that, "when not wholly invisible, we appear as marginal figures" (1995, 207), the translator has gone from being a marginal figure to being the central character in novels.

In Uribe's novel, Robert Mussche is presented as a person of firm ideas (Uribe 2012, 19) who is a charming speaker (*ibid.*) with a talent for making people feel at ease (35) and knows how to use the appropriate words for anyone he speaks to (*ibid.*). He is a character that is desperately in search of freedom, whose dream was "to roam the world free, without any kind of tie" (41). As for the nature of this character, he is a bank employee but then gets fired having been accused of stealing (86). From that moment on, he will earn a living as a journalist (73) and translator. It is mentioned in the narration that, among other occupations, he has taught Spanish classes in schools organized for the children of war, and, with the words of his preferred writers, he had made a notebook of dictations for the classes, because he was in the habit of copying extracts from his favorite authors (63). As regards personal relationships, one should highlight the fact that his basic relations are established through "conversation." The dialogues and reflections of Robert Mussche and his friend Herman Thierry (who is also a writer) are one of the main pillars of the novel. Mussche also acts in the same way as regards sentimental relationships. Yvonne (Robert's partner) explains their relationship to Herman in the following way:

"I don't know if Robert loves me," says Yvonne, changing the subject. (. . .) "He doesn't want a relationship with me. For him, I'm a beautiful woman, bright, well-



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read. Just a conversation partner. A piece of shit. So he's not even capable of kissing me, caressing me, he doesn't . . ." (Uribe 2012, 75)

In fictional works, the labor of the translator is often linked to isolation (Ibarluzea 2017, chap. 5.2), yet in this novel one notes signs of change as regards that tendency: Robert Mussch has no problems whatsoever when it comes to social relations. Although how we interpret his affective relations is another question altogether.

As the story progresses, Robert Mussche abandons his normal life and, embracing his commitment like a traveling companion, joins the Resistance (Uribe 2012, 117). Here is the image of the committed active agent and activist, as described by Ilse Logie: "The translator is recognized today as a figure that takes an active form or that, due to political motives, takes sides" (2005, 43). It is at that moment, when the character goes underground, that translation is mentioned for the first time:

The days are endless, I've finished my translation work, but the book is so ridiculous that I'm completely exasperated with the blatantly non-natural sentiments in it. And meanwhile we're experiencing a real tragedy here, a tragedy taken from real life. So, that's why I'm so angry with the style of these shallow exercises by this bourgeois author. I don't see any advantage in this translation, but I'll carry on doing it for two reasons: first, because it helps me to pass the time; second, because it will help us make a bit of money, with such an uncertain future. (Uribe 2012, 105–6)

Robert complains about his lack of identification with the author and inability to feel committed to the translation. As he makes clear in one section of the text, translation has a dual value at this moment: on the one hand, it is a pastime; on the other, it is a source of income. Robert's translation languages are also mentioned in the novel, as is a positive side of his work: being able to work from home.

The best thing was working in the apartment, without having to go to a workplace everyday. Herman got a suitable job for him: he would do translations. Robert

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could translate from German, French and Spanish into Dutch and he was a writer, he would be well suited to that job. He met up with Herman once a week in the Café de Paris in Brussels and he gave him the things to translate. (Uribe 2012, 113)

Robert also reflects on writing (and translating?) in Dutch on one occasion:

“My language is not very rich,” Robert remarked. “Why write in Dutch, in a language between the two great traditions of France and Germany?” he asked himself. “Because it situates me in the world as a person,” he said in a hushed voice, clenching his fists as he gazed at the raindrops soaking the ground. “I wouldn’t be me without the language of the workers on Ferrerlaan Street in Ghent.” (Uribe 2012, 119)

Returning now to the images of translation, since Robert does not just consider translation a pastime and source of income; he also learns a lot from translation and praises the stylistic and literary value of translation:

He reflects on translation at the café table. For many long days those writers have been his only company. And those voices help him to keep going more than those of real flesh-and-blood people. The solitude forces him to take as company those people who are not there, those who you have not seen for a long time, the dead, they are right there, in the same way as someone you’d run into every day when crossing the street, as real as they are. As the years go by something similar happens, the living and the dead, one recalls all their voices. “It’s strange”, he often thinks, “but it is clandestinity that has most drawn me to literature.” Since he left the bank, he’s never spent more time reading and writing. Robert learns a lot from translating all those foreign writers into Dutch. He likes repeating what is said in those foreign languages in his own language, it’s like entering into unexplored territory for him. The work of translation opens up windows onto

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unknown landscapes or, what amounts to the same thing, sentences that have never been written. (Uribe 2012, 118–9)

### **4 Some final words: The brief chronicle of a journey**

The affective link between literature and translation is to some extent a reflection of the author's own habitus: for Uribe, the work of translation is, on the one hand, an act of learning when it comes to writing in Basque, and we have seen that, as a published translator, he emphasizes the stylistic and literary value of translation. On the other hand, the translator is a traveling companion to traverse the world, a traveling companion to free up the world, one who is committed and skilled in the art of conversation. Those features, which Uribe has found in translators, have helped him to find his place as a Basque writer (indeed, Uribe is a firm proponent of normalizing language practices in small languages) in the national and international space (making use of occasional strategies such as, for example, drawing attention to not using bilingual versions or bridge languages) as well as both in commercial circles and those of the Basque-speaking community, but always emphasizing the human side of the exchange.

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