

The Isle of the Penelopides

Translation and Introductory Note
by Kelly J. Drumright

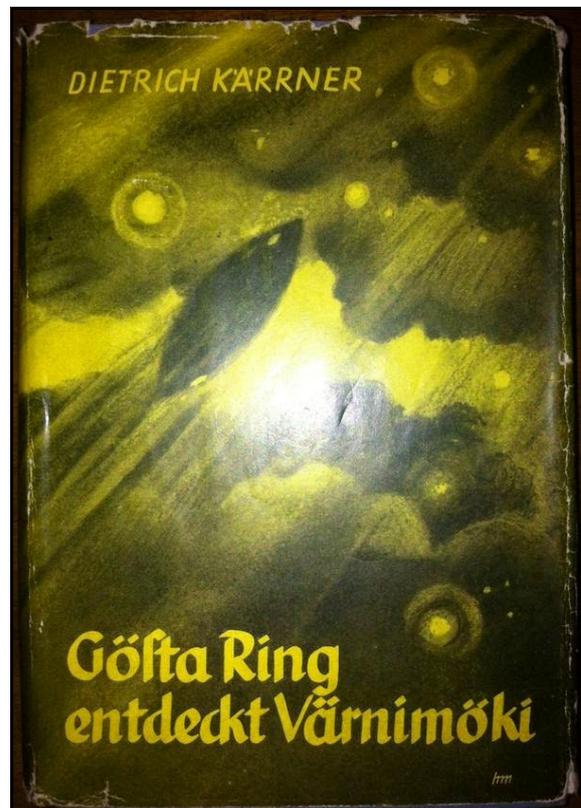
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Juan Iturralde y Suit (Pamplona 1840 — Barcelona 1909) was an archeologist, historian, writer, and painter. Much of Iturralde's intellectual trajectory hinged upon recuperating and revindicating Basque history, culture, and language; notable examples of this work include establishing the Asociación Euskara de Navarra in 1878 and directing the *Revista Euskara* from 1878-1883. Iturralde remained active in local politics throughout his life, serving as city councilman in the Ayuntamiento of Pamplona and on the Comisión de Monumentos Históricos y Artísticos de Navarra (Commission of Historical and Artistic Monuments of Navarre) (Induráin 229). He was also a member of the Academia San Ferrando and the Academia de la Historia.

Alongside his work as a historian and politician, Iturralde primarily wrote short fiction ranging from lyric descriptions and fables to satirical stories with didactic aims. “La ínsula de los Penelópidas (Cuento que no lo parece)” is an example of the latter. Written in 1892, this story recounts the adventures of an unnamed protagonist as he washes up on the shores of an unknown island and an informant introduces him to the peculiarities of the local society. Thus, we can situate the story squarely within genre of the imaginary voyage, in the vein of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), for example. It is a decidedly conservative text that laments the destruction of established traditions and institutions by the Penelopides, the island's ruling class. Augusto Uribe hypothesizes that the story's title re-

fers to Penelope, Queen of Ithaca and wife of Odysseus, who fended off her suitors by repeatedly weaving and unweaving a mourning shroud (Uribe n.p.). Readers will undoubtedly recognize echoes of Penelope's continuous making and unmaking in the strange policies of the isle's inhabitants.





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For this translation, I have used the version of the story that appears in *Cuentos, Leyendas y Descripciones Euskaras*, the first volume of Iturralde's *Obras Completas*, published posthumously in 1912 with a prologue by Arturo Campión. My primary aim when translating this text was to preserve Iturralde's expansive and rambling prose, replete with subordinate clauses and qualifiers, without sacrificing readability.

Works Cited

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Juan Iturralde y Suit

**The Isle of the Penelopides
(A Story That Does Not Seem It)**

...The ship that carried us on those unknown seas was, at one time, solid and capable of weathering worse storms than the ones we encountered; but improvements had been made to it under the pretext of its anachronistic construction, and so relentlessly had they modernized it, haphazardly and without prudent direction in order to make it fashionable and swift, that the ship was not even a shadow of the vessel it had once been. The decking was trimmed down; the ropes and chains were eliminated, supposedly because such things stank of oppression and tyranny; the rudder was removed for being a relic of those times when directions were necessary to see the world; the compass and sails, which were both deemed unnecessary, were broken into pieces; both steam and electricity were rejected as ancient, deciding instead that the splendid ship would have no other motor than *suggestion*, the newest force that, according to the latest science, sweeps things and people along...

And so, what must inevitably happen, happened. While the sea was calm, that contraption floated like a buoy, moving wherever the currents pulled it. Just as the storm commenced, the ship began experiencing setbacks and taking on water, concluding by smashing against the steep cliffs along the coast.

In the culminating moment of that frightening catastrophe I grabbed a piece of wood, and caught between two frothy vortexes, I found myself on the craggy rocks of the beach, bruised, hurt, and with my clothes in tatters. I looked around and discovered I was completely alone. I shifted my gaze to the sea...but the ship and all of my companions had perished in its depths!

Then I let myself fall exhausted upon the wet sand. Hiding my face in my hands, I raised a fervent prayer to Heaven, letting tears of pain and gratitude run freely.

I stayed that way for a long while, in an inexorable stupor, until I rose laboriously to my feet, tormented by hunger. The appearance of the country was horrible; the sun's light descended upon extensive plains and rocky hills whose distressing uniformity of color covered everything: the emptiness devoid of trees, shrubs, and even a single blade of grass. My spirit gave out once again before that scene of deepest desolation. Just then I spotted a strange individual in the distance—big, magnificent, smiling—who walked hastily toward me balancing upon a cane and wearing a motley suit with tinsel that threw shifting colors and shapes in every direction.

I regarded him with wonder as he regarded me with impertinence. Donning greenish glasses and taking me by the hand, he said to me with terrifying verbosity:

"I recognize by your most miserable appearance and ruined suit that you are a Spaniard, and I hasten to welcome you to this land, a sanctuary for madmen at all times. I will not ask you from where you come nor where you are going; here we do not ask that of anyone."

"Sir," I replied, "I cannot express the joy I feel upon hearing you speak my native tongue!"

"Here we speak all languages. There are some who say this land is a Tower of Babel."

"And I believed I had arrived on a deserted island..."

"Deserted?" he repeated briskly, "it's on the way to being so before long because those accursed islanders are so dissatisfied that, griping, they emigrate without appreciating the excellence of the laws and reforms we give them."

"Ah! Are you a politician, sir?"

"Here all of us are."

"Come now, just like in my homeland."

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“But my specialty is conserving, or rather restoring...”

“Paintings?”

“Everything,” he answered quickly. And without allowing me to finish he barreled on with the speed of an express train: “My colleagues and I restore laws, customs, languages, monuments, rivers, forests, that which is physical, moral, and intellectual, freedoms and traditions...”

“A noble mission!”

“Silence, man, and let me speak. We make up the most respected and respectable part of this previously crumbling society. We are the political powers and we make up a caste divided in diverse groups separated by differences in procedure and deep loathing, and yet we agree on that which is fundamental: living for the country and by the country, which we cherish with the delirious love that Saturn professed for his children...Come here, sir,” he said, interrupting himself. Taking hold of my arm and leading me to the foot of an ancient, dry, and mutilated oak, he continued, “Let us sit in the shade of the age-old jungle that stood here in the hateful times of obscurantism, and listen to me. In this lush and prosperous country...”

“Lush?” I dared to mutter, “more grass grows in any library in my homeland than in these scorched hills.”

“Are you going to let me speak or not? Your observation is the voice of the ignorant masses, the opinion of one who sees nothing but the outer shell of things. These fields will revegetate...but to do so it was absolutely necessary that they be cleared beforehand because how can one restore that which is not ruined? Is this not obvious? Well, here is the foundation for our system, which is profoundly philosophical and contains a great truth despite appearing paradoxical. Elevating our-

selves above the vulgar level of the unintelligent, we let venerated, magnificent religious and national monuments be destroyed, or we destroy them ourselves if necessary: monasteries, churches, shrines, and castles. However, we diligently collect some of the stones and fragments that will not attract official or private rapaciousness, and with them we construct and endow the most curious archeological museums. These institutions remind the stupid and ungrateful people of their lost glories, and we are overwhelmed with thunderous applause throughout the civilized world as they recognize our indisputable reputation as wise men. We raze admirable libraries, treasures and sanctuaries of our fowl ancestors’ knowledge and the foundations of our wisdom. But with the persistence of a junk seller, from the heaps of destroyed papers we record and extract what remains of the ruined, tattered editions of manuscripts and bindings. With these pieces we make magnificent collections while also permitting that the best of it be taken abroad; we do so both to justify our fame as good-natured and to demonstrate to our lands that science and culture are forgotten things...simply ancient! The forests have been felled with our authorization, but if only you could see the beautiful plantations we have designed! It is true that the rivers and springs dried up because of this clear cutting, but we will remedy that with artesian wells.”

“Sir! Such barbarism!...”

“And if our philanthropic foresight in the material realm is so distinguished, it is even more brilliant in matters of morality! For years now, we have dedicated ourselves to realize another essential element of progress. Because our society must first be modernized and made in accordance with latest fashions, we have removed faith, which is an old thing,



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or have tolerated its removal from the unfortunate people. Therefore, people have become criminal and have fallen to despair but forthwith we have constructed prisons and madhouses. We place freethinking professors, materialists, or atheists in the teaching positions of our educational establishments. We give the press free reign to preach the most solvent doctrines, thereby tearing out by the root the beliefs those old-fashioned islanders acquired in their childhood homes. But once our profound respect for wicked opinions has been demonstrated and the right to suicide recognized, it pleases us to show those misguided people the absurdity and immorality of their new doctrines, as well as the necessity to recover the former ones...as long as these do not malign our most sacred interests."

"Sir! Is your name Don Juan de Robres?"

"In a word," he continued, "free and compulsory education of evil, but woe to the numbskull who practices it to spite us; he will get beating after beating if it behooves us!"

"But, man, that is a disgrace!"

"It is knowing to combine the most absolute liberty with the most scientific culture in the most perfect order. It is making use of our profound sociological knowledge in practice. It is recognizing that the sovereign people have matured beyond youth and no longer require humiliating guardianship. It is teaching them the workings of the world..."

"Exactly, with a thrashing."

"Thrashing? Even that danger has been anticipated and avoided in accordance with our incomparable system, which has a solution for every conflict, whether material or moral. It is true that we authorize the manufacture and sale of forbidden weapons..."

"*Forbidden and authorized?*"

"But we forbid their use with the most se-

vere punishments; which is to say, while the sale of weapons is permitted, buying them is prohibited."

"Such admirable logic and justice!... Have you destroyed religious faith in such a way?"

"Little by little, sir: we are practical men. We have substituted faith in God, which I have told you is an antiquated thing and serves no purpose in these times, for faith in politics: unconditional and blind faith in the leader of the party or group to which one belongs, which is what feeds and fills and fattens..."

"So here the clergy no longer exists?"

"Of course the clergy exists! Because it is a guarantee of peace and tranquility! However, just as one must keep a guard dog in check with chains and on a perpetual diet in normal times, we unleash religious faith only when we find our people or property to be in danger, pleading that it defend us from the mob's entrapments. Furthermore, we reserve a savior's mission for the clergy similar to the bees that arduously construct housing and create honey; we protect and make use of this production when it is ready. Indeed, where would we have procured so many theaters and splendid quarters if not for the friars whom we expelled upon finishing the construction of their monasteries? We also reserve for the clergy the service of the Final Hour."

"Final hour?"

"Yes, man, yes; which is to say, the last hour. Because here we want everyone distant and spurned throughout their lives, but we are so generous that, upon dying, we call them forth to reconcile with us and so they will stamp our passports."

"Come now, the same happens in certain countries with which I am familiar: you deserve to be Europeans!"



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The unbelievable madman was going to proceed with his unflagging chatter when a little fellow arrived panting and handed him a document, thereby interrupting the man. The grand politician read it with marked interest and exclaimed despondently as he brought his hands to his brow in desperation:

“Nothing, nothing; calamities everywhere! Our resolve and abnegation are needed so as not to spoil everything! Sir, did you know? The capital informs me that the sea is invading and flooding the city and threatens to bury the entire country because of having demolished the great dikes that contained it.”

“But tell me sir, who permitted such an atrocity?”

“Man, you need not ask! We did. Because the dike is, we could say, the representation of the preventative system that we abhor. Furthermore, we did so with the objective of giving work to the disgruntled, but of course with the firm plan of reconstructing the dike as soon as they had finished leveling it.”

* * *

And the idiot began running to see if he could repair the damage, but there was no time. The dreadful racket of the furious waves could be heard from far away, similar to an earthquake; an immense mass of turbid, swirling waters grew and advanced with vertiginous speed, shattering, undoing, burying everything in its path. There was no salvation. I tried to climb the dry tree at my side, but it was brought down, and soon I was dragged under by the raging flood. Meanwhile, not far away, the eminent patrician who had just introduced me to the extraordinary customs of that unique country searched in vain for a way to save the dikes, trees, and

towers that he and his men had allowed to be destroyed; and he perished miserably, pleading for aid with heartbreaking voice...

I let out a cry of terror and anguish. I shook convulsively, noting that I was sinking into the abyss...and I awoke gripping the bars of my bed and drenched in sweat.

* * *

It must have been quite late. The sun's light, divided in bright and golden threads, penetrated the slits in the balcony. The confused buzz of the crowds milling about the streets could be felt; and the children could be heard announcing the savage anarchist attacks and their severe punishments destined to protect the threatened society. And at the same time, confused with obscene chants and frightening blasphemies hurled publicly with brutal indifference and tolerated with similar indifference, one could hear the same childish voices announcing *El Motín, Las Dominicales*,¹ and one hundred revolutionary newspapers riddled with threats, vile appeals to pillage and murder, and invitations to Masonic club meetings as well as conferences of freethinkers and spiritualists. I stretched laboriously, and with astonishment I took note of what was happening around me. I remembered my ludicrous dream. I scrubbed my eyes, wondering if I was still dreaming, and I thought bitterly:

“Is not the history of our aged Europe the same unbelievable history of that fantastic isle? Terrified, do we not also contemplate the advancing flood? And nevertheless, do we not continue stupidly knocking down the dikes intended to contain it?”

¹ *El Motín* [“riot”, “rebellion”, or “mutiny”] (1881-1926) and *Las Dominicales*, short for *Las Dominicales del Libre Pensamiento* [Freethought Sunday Supplements] (1883-1909), were two of the most radical and polemical periodical publications from late 19th and early 20th Century Spain. (*Translator's note*).