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THE IDEA OF VERNACULAR CULTURE IN THE ARABIC-AND ROMANCE-SPEAKING WORLD DURING THE MIDDLE AGES[1]

1. *Erich Auerbach and the Idea of Vernacular Culture*

In his essay "The Western Public and Its Language,"[2] Auerbach traces the development of the literary language in Western Europe between late Antiquity and the late Middle Ages, following the decline of Latin as the single medium for literary composition, and the rise of the Romance vernaculars. He describes the enervation of the Latin literary tradition as the result of the disjuncture between Latin and the spoken languages of the literary public. The Carolingian reform elevated the Latin of antiquity as the model for literary composition. "The consequence," he writes,"was an irrevocable cleavage between written Latin and the popular tongues. Latin lived on as an international organ of cultural life, as a language without any corresponding popular idiom from which to draw new life" (254). With the vernacular revolutions of the later Middle Ages, new literary languages were created out of the raw materials of the various spoken languages. Auerbach's essay traces the development of these languages as vehicles for literary composition, as "little by little they rose to maturity and in the end fashioned a literary public of their own" (277).

Auerbach's formulation in "The Western Public and Its Language" is designed to account for a binary opposition between a formal, written language and the spoken language of daily life. He uses this formulation to construct dynamic readings of the major literary developments of the Middle Ages, and it has become a crucial tool for medieval literary historians. However, more recent developments in literary-historical scholarship suggest that — though the opposition between written and

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[1] All translations are my own. However, I have included page number references to the published English translation of *al-Muqaddima* corresponding to the passages I have translated for this essay.

[2] In *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London, 1965), 237-338.

spoken tongues which Auerbach describes was central to literary devel-
opment— in fact the medieval literary scene was more complex. A di-
mension must be added to the binary model that Auerbach describes in
order to account for the competition between diverse literary-linguistic
paradigms typical, in particular, of southern Europe during key eras.

In al-Andalus, in Provence, and in Sicily, between the tenth and the
thirteenth centuries, poets drew on local spoken vernaculars to invent
new literary languages. The new poetic traditions which emerged in
these regions —Andalusian *muwashshaḥ* poetry, the troubadour lyric
of Provence, the courtly love poetry written in the Sicilian dialect—
had a decisive impact on subsequent literary development. After an
initial period of literary innovation, others wrote accounts of the poets'
works, in the form of literary histories, poetic manuals, or grammars.
These treatises document the stages by which later generations sifted
through the innovations introduced by the earlier poets, and strove to
preserve and develop further those which seemed to have a lasting
relevance and efficacy. In this essay, I will read two such literary-his-
torical studies —Ibn Khaldūn's description of Andalusian poetry and
Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*— in order to gauge the broader cultural
response to the poets' linguistic experiments. Both Ibn Khaldūn and
Dante analyse linguistically innovative poetry not by opposing it to a
single, formal literary language, but by describing the regional unique-
ness of each form, and contrasting the various forms to each other. That
is, their discussions do not focus on a binary opposition between the
written language and the vernacular, but attempt to characterise the
particular by opposing it to a plurality of variants. Auerbach's narra-
tive —the alienation of a literary language from the language spoken
by its public; the invention of a new literary language, incorporating el-
ements of the spoken tongue, to replace it— remains relevant to these
accounts. But they add a new dimension to Auerbach's formulation,
demonstrating the importance of interaction and, more importantly,
competition between diverse literary/linguistic paradigms in the de-
velopment of new literary languages during the late Middle Ages. And
a parallel reading of the two works demonstrates that they do share
certain common concerns, that they both strive to define and to react to
an emerging literary concept: the idea of vernacular culture.

2. *Arabic "vernacular" culture*

The idea of vernacular culture outlined in Auerbach's essay is, of course,
anomalous in the Arabic context. To the present day, the division be-
tween the formal written language and the spoken languages of daily

life is maintained in the Arabic-speaking world: colloquial Arabic is not written, and the written language is not spoken, except in formal situations.[3] Given this fundamental difference between the Arabic and Romance vernacular paradigms, it is tantalising to consider the parallels between the emergence of the Romance vernacular literary cultures, and the development of new Arabic poetic forms incorporating elements of colloquial Arabic or of a language other than Arabic —that is, the *muwashshaḥ* and the *zajal*— in al-Andalus.

The questions of origin or influence that often inform *muwashshaḥ*-scholarship will not interest me in this study; instead, I will focus on broader, comparative issues, using the account of the *muwashshaḥ* and related poetic forms given in *al-Muqaddima* (*The Introduction to History*) by Ibn Khaldūn (1332-82 C.E.). Perhaps because he was not a literary historian, unlike the authors of the other early descriptions of the *muwashshaḥ*, and perhaps because he wrote from a greater historical distance than those authors,[4] Ibn Khaldūn gives us the fullest account of the environment in which the *muwashshaḥ*and the *zajal* developed. The picture of the new Andalusian poetic forms that emerges from his description, and of their reception in the Arabic-speaking world, mirror the earliest Romance vernacular lyric movements and the impact they made on Latin literary culture in a number of crucial ways: It seems reasonable to assert, despite all the uncertainties that still cloud our understanding of the *muwashshaḥ*, that it was perceived by those who wrote about it as different in important ways from conventional Arabic poetry. It was identified with a certain kind of linguistic experimentation. It was originally perceived as a regional literary form. And certain of the innovations that it introduced were ultimately absorbed by the larger Arabic-speaking world.

Ibn Khaldūn begins his account of the *muwashshaḥ* by identifying it as the chief poetic achievement for which the Andalusians were

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[3] The exception to this generalisation, arguably, is the literature of Malta. Maltese is an Arabic dialect with a large number of Italian loan-words. Though certainly anomalous —it is written in the Latin alphabet, and modern Malta is a Christian state— a case may be made for Maltese language and literature as being the only colloquial Arabic literary tradition.

[4] I am thinking of Ibn Bassàm (d. 1147 C.E.), who compiled a four-volume collection of poetry from his native al-Andalus (*Al-DhakhīZ*[A treasure-trove of the beauties of the people of al-Andalus]); Averroes (1126-1198 C.E.), who touches on the poetic forms in a passage from his commentary on Aristotle's Poetics; and Ibn Sanā᾽ al-Mulk (1155-1211 C.E.), who wrote an *ars poetica* of the form (*Dār al-Ṭirāz* [*The House of Embroidery*]) which remains a valuable, though problematic, resource for scholars of Andalusian muwashshah.

known in the greater Arabic-speaking world, and by hailing it as a sig-
nificant poetic innovation:

> In al-Andalus, poetry developed, and its forms and varieties were re-
> fined. Elaborate composition reached an apogee among the Andalusians.
> Modern [poets] among them invented a new form which they call the
> *muwashshah*[5]

In this brief statement, Ibn Khaldūn confirms the regional specificity
associated with the *muwashshah*: he identifies it as an Andalusian
form. And he indicates that it constitutes a noteworthy formal innova-
tion, an *invention*, significant for its difference from conventional Ara-
bic poetic forms. He will use the same verb (*istaḥadatha*) later in this
chapter to characterise the appearance of the *zajal*, stating that An-
dalusian poets "invented" these new forms. The standard meaning of
the adjective that Ibn Khaldūn uses to describe the *muwashshah*poets
(*al-mutaʾakhkhir ūna*), which I have translated as "modern," is
"recent." Clearly, when Ibn Khaldūn uses the word in this context, he is
not drawing on its narrow temporal significance. He will go on to iden-
tify the inventor of the new form as Muqaddam Ibn Muʿāfir al-Qabrīrī,
who lived some four and a half centuries earlier (Arabic text 767; En-
glish translation 440). In a literary context, the word Ibn Khaldūn uses
to describe the *muwashshah*poets can evoke a contrast, expressed or im-
plied, with the term *al-mutaqaddim ūna* ("preceding" or "ante-ce-
dent"); in this usage it denotes "post-classical" authors. In this first
mention of the *muwashshah*, Ibn Khaldūn identifies it as an Andalu-
sian invention; he attributes to the form a sense of modernity and of re-
gional specificity.

The characteristic that Ibn Khaldūn most celebrates in the
muwashshah is its "ease," its lack of "artificiality." He records a
charming statement, attributed to the *muwashshah* poet Ibn Ḥazmun,
describing the primary importance of ease of diction in the composition
of the *muwashshah*: "A *muwashshah* is not a *muwashshah* until it is
free of artificiality (*or* mannerism)" (Arabic text 772; English transla-
tion 448). When his companion asks for an elucidation of this state-
ment, Ibn Hazmun responds by quoting verses from a *muwashshah*he
has writtun. Ibn Khaldūn considers the notion of "ease" so essential to

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5 Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima* (Tunis, 1984; hereafter cited as "Arabic text") 767; *The Muqaddimah; An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, 1967; here-after cited as "English translation") 440.

the *muwashshaḥ*that he introduces it at the very beginning of his chapter on Andalusian poetry. Here he is discussing the early development of the form in al-Andalus:

> They strove with each other for excellence in this [poetry], and all the people found it charming, both the upper classes and the common people, because it was limpid and easy to grasp. (Arabic text 767; English translation 440)

The precise nature of the "ease" to which Ibn Khaldūn alludes is difficult to pin down. He, like Ibn Ḥazmun, resorts to quotation in order to illustrate it for his readers. Despite the ambiguity of this notion, however, Ibn Khaldūn suggests that it constitutes for him an essential aspect of the innovation initiated by the poets of al-Andalus: the modern poetic form he describes became popular because the literary public responded with enthusiasm to its "ease."

When Ibn Khaldūn discusses the *zajal*, he will again take up the idea of "ease." He will again state that Andalusian poets produced remarkable and innovative works by striving to attain eloquence using the accessible new medium they have developed. And he will introduce a theme that will occupy him for the rest of his discussion, an explicit focus on the language used by these modern poets. This passage marks the transition between Ibn Khaldūn's treatments of the *muwashshaḥ* and the *zajal*:

> This *muwashshaḥ* -craft spread among the people of al-Andalus. The common people took it up, because of its ease and the elegance of its vocabulary and its ornamentation. The common people in the towns followed in their footsteps, and composed poetry in this manner in their city-dialects, without adhering to the declensional endings [of classical Arabic]. They invented a form which they called the *zajal*, and they continue to compose in this form to the present day. They have achieved marvels in this form, and have produced works of great eloquence, using their non-Arabic tongues. (Arabic text 778; English translation 454)

The *zajal*, in his telling, constitutes both a departure from and a continuation of the innovations introduced by the *muwashshaḥ*. As the *muwashshaḥ* poets invented a "modern" literary form that distinguished their works from traditional Arabic poetry, so the *zajal* poets departed from the conventions established by the *muwashshaḥ* poets. The aspect of the *zajal* that most interests Ibn Khaldūn is its linguistic innovation. He states that the *zajal* poets developed a new form of poetry by adapting the *muwashshaḥ* to accommodate elements of their

spoken dialects, and that they then strove successfully to produce elo-
quent works in the genre they invented.

Ibn Khaldūn will go on from his discussion of the *zajal* to talk about
poetry written in other parts of the Arabic-speaking world that incor-
porates elements of local, colloquial language. After discussing and cit-
ing *muwashshaḥ*-like poetry written by poets from the Maghrib and
from Baghdad, he concludes the chapter with a comment that affirms
his keen interest in the *muwashshaḥ*-poets' linguistic experimentation:

> It should be known that literary taste, regarding the recognition of elo-
> quence, comes to one who is immersed in the language in question, and
> who uses it constantly, and has spoken it amongst its people, until he ac-
> quires mastery of it, as we said in the case of the Arabic language.
> (Arabic text 790; English translation 479)

Ibn Khaldūn had begun this chapter of *al-Muqaddima* with the phrase
wa-amma ahl al-Andalus (literally, "and as for the people of al-An-
dalus...."), implying that his subject matter will be the poets of al-An-
dalus. By the time the chapter closes, however, his focus has shifted
significantly: his essay has become a survey of linguistic experimenta-
tion by poets throughout the Arabic-speaking world.

In order to follow the development of Ibn Khaldūn's argument, it
will be helpful to retrace his steps. He introduces the first literary in-
novation inaugurated by modern Andalusian poets, the *muwashshaḥ*,
and identifies it with a new sense of "ease" and accessibility, in the
opening sentences of the chapter. His discussion of the *muwashshaḥ*,
however, includes examples of the genre written by non-Andalusian po-
ets; the topic has been silently expanded to include responses to the An-
dalusian innovation produced by poets from other parts of the Arabic-
speaking world. When he turns to the *zajal*, he returns to al-Andalus,
repeats the themes of innovation and ease, and introduces a new theme:
linguistic experimentation. The remainder of the chapter surveys par-
allel forms of linguistic experimentation written by Andalusian, Bagh-
dadi, and Maghribi poets. In his concluding remarks, he celebrates ver-
nacular eloquence in its discrete, regional forms. The development of his
argument suggests that his primary concern is not to produce a *précis* of
Andalusian poetry, nor even of a particular, innovative Andalusian po-
etic form. Rather, his intent is to discuss the emergence of modern po-
etic forms, which appeared first in al-Andalus and then spread to
other parts of the Arabic-speaking world, and are associated with ac-
cessibility and with a specific linguistic innovation, the incorporation
of elements of local colloquial tongues.

Auerbach, in his discussion of the rise of the vernacular literatures in medieval Europe, describes a situation that is in many regards similar to the development outlined by Ibn Khaldūn. Vernacular poets produced works that were "easier" and more accessible. These works were marked by a focus on new subject matter (most notably, the courtly love theme) and by the invention of new stanzaic forms. But the most revolutionary innovation introduced in this poetry was the use of the spoken tongue, rather than Latin, as a vehicle for formal literary composition. The modern poets vied, in competition with each other and with literary history, to achieve eloquence in the genres they invented. Ibn Khaldūn writes that the first composers of *muwashshah*s "strove with each other for excellence in this [poetry]" (quoted above). And he states with approval that the *zajal* poets "have achieved marvels in this form, and have produced works of great eloquence" (quoted above). James Monroe, in an essay on the *muwashshah*, speculates that "the cultural and political rivalry existing between East and West probably was one of the important factors which led Andalusian poets to invent a formal innovation such as the *muwashshah*, thus freeing themselves from the burden of Oriental traditionalism in poetry."[6] In a similar way, according to Auerbach, Dante when writing the *Divine Comedy* strove to produce a monument that could surpass the works of other regional vernacular poets, and stand alongside the literary works of Latin antiquity. Such competition is, of course, common to all authors, wherever and whenever they write. The parallel between the medieval Arabic and medieval Romance writers, however, is striking because of the similarity of the traditions against which the modern writers were pitted. Both groups wrote innovative poetry which addressed the disjuncture between the language of literature and the language of daily life; both used the spoken language to give their poetry a new vitality. And both strove to produce works, using these new languages and poetic forms, which could be deemed as eloquent as more linguistically conventional poetry.

If there are structural similarities between medieval Arabic and Romance literary experimentation, however, there is one definitive difference between the two traditions. The regional languages which were first used as a literary vehicle by the Romance vernacular poets were to evolve into the languages of modern Europe. After the Renaissance, Latin literary culture would survive only in very limited environments: as a language of convenience for scientists and other intellectuals; as the language of the Roman church. The linguistic experimen-

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[6] James T. Monroe, *The Muwashshahat* (Oxford, 1965) 21.

tation of the *muwashshaḥ* poets, however, was to remain a discrete event, without revolutionary impact on Arabic literary culture. The *muwashshaḥ* survives to the present day as a form of popular song. But formal, written Arabic remains a vital, living literary language in the Arabic-speaking world.

Ibn Khaldūn's chapter on the *muwashshaḥ* and related poetic forms is the last of his monumental work *al-Muqaddima*. Reading over the comment with which he concludes that final chapter, one is struck by its open-endedness, the sense of possibility that it conveys. I give those concluding comments here in full:

> It should be known that literary taste, regarding the recognition of elo-quence, comes to one who is immersed in the language in question, and who uses it constantly, and has spoken it amongst its people, until he ac-quires mastery of it, as we said in the case of the Arabic language. The Andalusian does not understand the eloquence of the poetry of the people of the Maghrib; and the Maghribi does not understand the eloquence of the poetry of the people of al-Andalus or of the East; and the Easterner does not understand the eloquence of the poetry of the people of al-An-dalus or of the Maghrib. Rather, the local languages and their [literary] composition differ one from the other, and each person is aware of the eloquence of his own language and has a taste for the beauty of the po-etry of his own people. "In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the differences of your languages and your colours, there are signs for those who understand." [Qurʾān 30:22] (Arabic text 790; English trans-lation 479-80)

This extraordinary passage, with which Ibn Khaldūn closes the body of his work, is perhaps most remarkable for its lack of closure. It would be a mistake to overread Ibn Khaldūn's treatment of the discrete literary voices emerging within the Arabic tradition, to suggest that he is de-scribing a literary/linguistic revolution parallel in its conception and intentions to the Romance vernacular revolution, one which differed only in its failure to transform Arabic literature. However, I would like to close this discussion of Ibn Khaldūn's treatment of the *muwashshaḥ* and related literary forms by pointing out two of the themes that this passage opens up: first, his suggestion, simply stated but profound in its implications, that "vernacular eloquence" is comparable to eloquence in formal, literary Arabic. And secondly, his attention to regional differ-ence, his attempt to define the regional voices that in their totality constitute the Arabic-speaking world by pointing out their difference from each other.

3. *The* De vulgari eloquentia *and the Romance vernacular traditions*

The literary critic Gianfranco Contini has argued, persuasively and influentially, that the works of Dante embody a sense of *plurality* that would subsequently disappear from Italian literature. In one of the essays in which he addresses this issue, he states: "Of the most visible and summary attributes that pertain to Dante, the first is plurilingualism."[7] Contini's notion of plurilingualism is broadly defined; he specifies that he refers not only to the fact that Dante wrote both in Latin and in Italian, but also to the wide range of literary styles and literary genres represented in his works. Dante's eclecticism, in Contini's reading of him, is a result of his life-long project of self-examination, which itself is the result of his struggle to define himself and his poetics against the plurality of possibilities which he recognised in his environment and in literary history. "There is no peace in him," Contini writes in another essay, "but the torment of the dialectic" (320). Throughout his life, in both his literary and literary-critical works, Dante engaged in a dialogue with Latin and Romance vernacular authors, seeking to understand what others had written before him and to define and defend the potential that he perceived for vernacular literature. The "dialectic" to which Contini refers is this constant interrogation of literary tradition, Dante's ongoing analysis and contextualisation of his own work.

Auerbach's reading of Dante in his essay "The Western Public and Its Language" focuses on the struggle between Latin literary history and the new Italian vernacular literature witnessed in Dante's work. Dante's *Comedy* is singled out by Auerbach as a monument in the development of the Romance vernaculars. In it, Auerbach asserts, Dante demonstrated that the Italian language, no less than Latin, was able to express lofty ideas and to achieve sublime literary effects. Indeed, the tension between Latin tradition and Romance innovation is central to the *Comedy*, and to Dante's works in general. In this essay, however, I will consider Dante's work in a different perspective, as a response not to the problem of Latin/vernacular *bilingualism*, but to the problem of *plurilingualism*. Thus, I take a cue from Contini; but I will understand "plurlingualism" more literally than Contini did. In the century before him, Italian literature was written in Franco-Veneto, in Occitan, and in the Sicilian dialect. These Italian literatures —Italian because they were written on the Italian peninsula, not because they were written in Italian— were produced by writers who were aware of, and engaged, the new literary traditions established in the Occitan and French

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[7] Gianfranco Contini, *Varianti e altra linguistica* (Turin, 1970) 171.

works of the troubadours and the *trouvères*. Dante's idea of literary Italian is articulated in response to these other languages, as well as to the Latin tradition. In addition to attempting to produce a *modern* language as eloquent as the Latin of antiquity —the aspect of his work on which Auerbach's reading is focused— Dante also strove to define a *regional* language able to compete with the other regional literary languages of the Europe of his time. And the work in which he most explicitly addresses European plurilingualism, and the problem of language in general, is his most focused and technical treatment of language and literature, the *De vulgari eloquentia*.

At the beginning of the *De vulgari*, Dante defines the language that will be the subject of his work first by characterising it as "natural," and then by contrasting it with Latin, which is learned only through formal study. In this passage he introduces his conception of the vernacular:

> vulgarem locutionem appellamus eam qua infantes assuefiunt ab assisten-
> tibus cum primitus distinguere voces incipiunt; vel, quod brevius dici
> potest, vulgarem locutionem asserimus quam sine omni regula nutricem
> imitantes accipimus. Est et inde alia locutio secundaria nobis, quam Ro-
> mani gramaticam vocaverunt; hanc quidem secundariam Greci habent et
> alii, sed non omnes.[8] Ad habitum vero huius pauci perveniunt, quia non
> nisi per spatium temporis et studii assiduitatem regulamur et doctrinamur
> in illa.[9]

> We call "vernacular speech" that which infants become accustomed to
> from those around them when they first begin to distinguish words; or,
> more briefly stated, we assert that vernacular speech is that which we
> acquire by imitating our nurse, without any training. We also have an-
> other, secondary language, which the Romans called the *gramatica*; this
> secondary language the Greeks possess, and others, but not all [peoples].
> Few come to the possession of this language, however, because we are
> trained and schooled in it only by means of a lengthy and assiduous
> study.

The vernacular is our mother tongue, the language that we learn "sine omni regula"—literally, *without any rule* — as infants. In addition to this first language, we possess "another, secondary language," one

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[8] Mengaldo places a period after "vocaverunt" and a colon after "omnes." I have revised his punctuation, in order to better reflect the sense of the passage: Dante is arguing, first, that certain nations possess a vernacular and a *gramatica*; and secondly, that among the peoples who do possess a *gramatica*, there are few individuals who manage to learn it well.

[9] *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo; in *Opere minori*, Vol. 2, pp. 26-237 (Milan and Naples, 1979; hereafter cited as "DVE"), I, 1, 2 (p. 30).

which is acquired only by those who undergo a demanding program of study in order to master it. His choice of words is judicious. The Latin word *secundarius*, like the English word "secondary," can mean both "subsequent" and "second-rate." Dante goes on to argue that of these two languages, the vernacular is the more noble, in part "because it is natural to us" ("quia naturalis est nobis"; DVE I, i, 4 [pp. 30-32]).

In this introduction of the subject of his study, the comparative nature of Dante's argument is already evident. Dante specifies that the dual linguistic tradition he describes —the opposition of "natural" spoken language and learned formal language— is possessed by the Romans, the Greeks, "and others." Mengaldo, editor of the *De vulgari eloquentia*, indicates in his footnote to this passage that modern scholars believe that Dante is probably thinking of the Hebrew and Arabic traditions, and quotes Roger Bacon, who parallels the *gramatica* of the Greeks, the Hebrews, and the Arabs (DVE, 31, note 7). This urge to initiate a linguistic or literary analysis by balancing the tradition to be treated against other, parallel traditions is echoed in a pair of Occitan grammatical works that predate the *De vulgari eloquentia*. Mallorcan Berenguer d'Anoia wrote his *Mirall de trobar* during the closing years of the thirteenth century or the first quarter of the fourteenth century.[10] He begins the work with an account of the origins of the alphabet, relating that it was invented by a nymph who lived on an island in the sea of Sicily (82/83); in this, as in other details of his linguistic history, he is following Isidore. He then goes on to describe the history of the word "alphabet":

> I aixi' s'anomena alfabet, que procedeix o es pres del grec, i en hebraic es diu alfabet, i en arabic es diu alifbet.[11]

> Therefore it is called "alphabet," which comes from or is close to the Greek, and in Hebrew it is called "alfabet," and in Arabic it is called "alifbet."

Berenguer will not go into further detail regarding the Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic traditions. He uses them to provide a context for his discussion of Occitan literature: he traces the Latinate tradition he will describe back to an origin that has parallels in the Greek-, Hebrew-, and Arabic-speaking worlds. Raimon Vidal's *Razos de trobar*, composed between 1190-1213,[12] was the first grammatical work composed in or

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[10]Elena Landoni's dating (Landoni, *La teoria letteraria dei provenzali* [Florence, 1989] 126).

[11] *Ibid.*, 85.

[12] Marshall's dating (J.H. Marshall, *The Razos de Trobar of Raimon Vidal and Associated Texts* [London, 1972] lxx).

about a Romance vernacular language. Near the beginning of this work, we find a similar comparatist formula:

> Totas genz cristianas, iusieuas et sarazinas, emperador, princeps, rei, duc, conte ... clergue, borgues, vilans, paucs et granz, meton totz iorns lor entendiment en trobar et en chantar ... [13]

> All people, Christians, Jews, and Saracens, emperor, prince, king, duke, count ... clergyman, burger, peasant, great or small, think every day about the composition and singing [of songs]...

Like Berenguer, Raimon begins by sketching a broad panorama, in order to provide a context for the particular matter he will discuss. He is not interested in the songs of the Jews or the Saracens. Their relevance is exhausted once he has used them to demonstrate that the Occitan tradition which he will describe is but one among a number of like traditions.

The Jews, the Arabs, and the Greeks share with the Latins a common concept of the alphabet; Berenguer traces the Occitan literary tradition he will describe to a Greco-Latin source. Christians, Jews, and Saracens sing songs; Raimon will discuss one of the lyric traditions of the Christians. The Romans, the Greeks, "and others" possess a formal written language and a vernacular; Dante will be concerned with the Latinate tradition. Despite the differences between the specific subject matters they treat, each of these writers uses a similar strategy in order to attain a comparable goal. Each, at the outset of his work, evokes a plurilingual backdrop against which he will set the particular literary or linguistic tradition he will treat. This backdrop, in each case, is roughly defined. None of the writers displays any keen interest in or knowledge of the other traditions he mentions. Each will proceed rapidly from the plural to the particular: from the comparatist formulas with which they begin their works, to a discussion of a particular Romance vernacular literary/linguistic tradition.

Dante's project in the *De vulgari* is more ambitious than Raimon's or Berenguer's, and he must pass through several intermediary stages before reaching his goal: he will parallel a number of literary/linguistic traditions, the scope of his comparison gradually narrowing until he focuses on the Italian literary and linguistic situation. He cites the Biblical story of the tower of Babel in order to account for the diversity of human tongues (I, vii). He gives a brief list of the languages of Europe, encompassing both Germanic and Romance families (I, viii, 3). He divides the Romance languages into three primary groups,

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[13] *Ibid.*, 2.

French, Occitan, and Italian, and cites poetry in order to illustrate the distinct achievements of poets writing in these languages (I, viii-ix). He then subdivides the third item on this list still further: he points out that the Italian language is not monolithic, but is spoken differently in different parts of the Italian peninsula. He surveys the varieties of Italian in both its spoken and written forms; he analyses the differences between the Italian dialects, and judges their individual merits and shortcomings (I, xi-xv). Throughout this discussion of the languages and literatures of contemporary Europe, the methodology of Dante's analysis is comparative: he strives to define the particular in opposition to the plural.

Auerbach's discussion of Dante in "The Western Public and Its Language" focuses on an agonistic, binary struggle between a modern vernacular writer and the authors of Latin antiquity. The reading that I offer here is intended not to challenge but to augment Auerbach's reading. Dante begins his linguistic analysis, in the passage quoted above, by evoking an opposition between a learned language and a spoken vernacular; and certainly, if we read the *De vulgari eloquentia* with an awareness of his other works and of the literary issues that concerned him throughout his life, we must acknowledge the centrality of Latin literary history to his conception of contemporary literature in general, and his own works in particular. The details of the project he undertakes in the *De vulgari*, however, encourage us to read his competition with the Latin heritage as only one facet of his attempt to define a literary identity. Opposition to parallel contemporary traditions was crucial to Dante's project of self-definition (and other early vernacular writers demonstrate a similar urge to define their literary identity by listing and distinguishing parallel traditions).

The "plurilingualism" which Contini perceives in the figure of Dante provides a point of departure for understanding and describing the comparative nature of these writers' approach to self-definition. Contini places Dante in a medieval environment where the boundaries between Latin and the vernacular, between literary genres and literary styles, were not yet distinctly drawn. Dante's (and Raimon's and Berenguer's) comparatist gestures draw our attention to another ambiguous borderland: the march between languages — between the Italian dialects; between the Romance tongues; between the languages of Christian Europe; between the literary and linguistic practices of Christian, Muslim, and Jew — where fences must be erected and territories defined before the literary historian's argument can proceed.

4.*The vernacular "avant gardes" of the Middle Ages*

In "The Literary Language of the Western Public," Auerbach provides a narrative for understanding the emergence of vernacular cultures in medieval Europe. The readings of Ibn Khaldūn and Dante above suggest that the contest that Auerbach described in the context of Latin Europe constituted a part of a broader attempt to use language in new ways in order to define and articulate a unique sense of regional and historical identity. Ibn Khaldūn's description of the *muwashshaḥ* demonstrates that Arabic poets' use of the spoken vernaculars of al-Andalus was perceived as a regional, modernising innovation, much as the vernacular Romance poets' works were perceived as a regionally and historically specific challenge to Latin tradition. Furthermore, Dante's argument in the *De vulgari eloquentia* indicates that Romance vernacular poets defined their work in opposition to other, parallel literary/linguistic traditions, and to contemporary poetry in other Romance vernaculars, as well as to Latin literary history. Auerbach's binary opposition between a monolithic literary tradition and a series of discrete neo-traditions is opened up, to accommodate a complex set of communications and competitions, in both Christian and Muslim Europe, between local voices and the literary traditions of other eras and other lands.

Such linguistic complexity is not limited to the Muslim-Christian borderlands of the Iberian and Italian peninsulas; students of other literatures may recognise parallels between developments in southern Europe and the competition in other regions between Germanic, Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Romance traditions. But when scholars of European literary history acknowledge these dramas, they often consider them to be marginal to the greater narrative of literary development in the Christian West, which is characterised by the disintegration of the Latin literary tradition and the subsequent emergence of the vernacular literatures. Auerbach discusses literary development on the Iberian peninsula in this passage:

> From the very start the Iberian peninsula was in a special situation, for there the Romance popular idioms had to contend not with the unchallenged domination of Latin but with several languages which served both for spoken and written expression and had developed in a variety of ways. In Andalusia, with its elegant and colourful popular culture, Mozarabic Spanish came into contact with other languages; the Arabs and Jews adopted it, employing it, for purposes of entertainment, in the poetic forms of their own languages, and it seems likely that Romance poetry was nowhere committed to writing so soon as here, within the frame of the Arabic and Hebrew muwassas. In the Spanish Middle Ages Latin was not the uncontested written language... (320)

Auerbach's goal is to follow a thread of literary development from Latin Antiquity to the emergence of the Indo-European vernacular literatures in late medieval Europe. In this context, the literary culture of al-Andalus functions as an occlusion, or an interruption, of another literary history. Auerbach will not discuss literary development in al-Andalus further, except to mention the evidence the Romance-language *kharjas* provide regarding the development of a Romance vernacular lyric tradition in the Iberian peninsula (340).

The readings of Ibn Khaldūn and Dante above demonstrate the need to augment the basic narrative of Auerbach's influential essay, in order to produce a more comprehensive reading of medieval literary history. Some of the innovative ideas sketched in these works would be fundamental to subsequent literary development. But others would disappear without having a lasting impact on literary or cultural history. The *muwashshah* poets of al-Andalus, the Occitan poets of Provence, Sicilian and Tuscan poets used new linguistic forms to express a new content. Subsequent generations would evaluate those poets' innovations, preserving and building on some of them and rejecting others. In most of these cases, a regionally specific linguistic difference would disappear while the innovative form or content of the poetry would serve as the basis for further development. Thus the Occitan lyrics of the troubadours would find French and Sicilian imitators; a Sicilian poetic revolution would inspire a distinctly Tuscan poetic movement; *muwashshah*s would be written in other parts of the Arabic-speaking world. Like the modernist avant gardes of the early twentieth century, the Andalusian and Occitan poets transformed contemporary cultural practice, in response to radical political and intellectual upheavals. And as in the case of the modernists, the experimentation of these medieval poets generated an "avant garde excess," innovations which could not be accommodated by mainstream artists and thinkers, and would be rejected or normalised by subsequent literary history.

Two shifts in the basic narrative structure of Auerbach's essay —from a triumphalist narrative, designed to describe the emergence of the literary languages of modern Europe, to an avant garde model, focused on experimentalism as an end in itself; from a binary opposition between a written language and a spoken tongue to a plural opposition of diverse literary/linguistic paradigms — allow us to see medieval literary history in a new light. The poets whose works Ibn Khaldūn and Dante read were not only concerned with inventing a single literary language which could challenge the authority of the single language of literary history. They strove, as well, to invent a particular voice that they could use to represent themselves to a plurilingual, international poetic audience. Their experimentation would be observed, evaluated,

and contained by subsequent poets and literary historians; the studies written by Ibn Khaldūn and Dante represent part of this process. Most intriguing is the light that Ibn Khaldūn's and Dante's literary histories shed on the parallel articulation, in the Arabic and Romance literary environments, of an idea of vernacular culture: the use of fluid and expressive new linguistic registers as poetic vehicles, and the perception of them as a challenge to literary tradition, and as a representation of local cultural identity, a response to similar literary constructions emanating from the other regions with which local writers perceived themselves to be in competition.

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