

María Rosa Menocal

TEN YEARS AFTER: THE VIRTUES OF EXILE¹

“Finally, a foreign soil is proposed, since it, too, gives a man practice. All the world is a foreign soil to those who philosophise.... The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native land is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is a foreign land....”

Hugh of St. Victor

The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History first came out in 1987, almost exactly ten years ago as I write this, although it is a book that had its beginnings more than a decade before. I recount part of the story in the “Preface” of the book itself, because it struck me at the time, as it still does, as emblematic: the story of a graduate student in medieval Romance languages more or less accidentally coming upon the Arabic verb *ṭaraba* in a first-year Arabic class, and figuring out, bit by bit, the very long story of the tortured scholarly quarrels over the etymology of Provençal *trobar*, and thus of the word “troubadour” as well as the entire cultural complex that word evokes. It is, of course, not just any word, nor any random one of the thousands of disputed etymologies in our languages. Instead it is the evocation of an unusually powerful set of cultural features that lies at the heart, as Nietzsche had said, of the West’s most profound and romantic notions of what it is, of its very essence. Even when we, as a culture, have pretty much forgotten what Provençal is, as we almost have, we retain a strong sense (as well we should) of the distinctiveness of that culture, and it is a vexing issue to deal with the “origins” —by which we really mean the “identity”— of that culture when it might appear that some significant and central aspect of it lies in a cultural complex that we are habituated, acculturated, to see as quintessentially “Other,” in Said’s vastly influential articulation of it.

SCRIPTA MEDITERRANEA, Vols XIX-XX 1998-1999, 55

¹ Editor’s note: This essay, translated into Arabic, will appear as the introduction to the Arabic translation of Prof. Menocal’s *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*.

Ten years later, I believe more than ever that it is all about the question of identity, and that the intellectual challenge is to have a working model, a language, of cultural identity that can account for the powerful hybridness of European cultural identity in its formative period. Ten years ago, I saw the principal impediment to the development of such a vision as a rather crude, albeit powerful, prejudice “that Westerners —Europeans— have great difficulties in considering the possibility that they are in some way seriously indebted to the Arab world, or that the Arabs were central to the making of medieval Europe” (xiii). But during this past decade, in the American academic universe as well as in the wider world, the problem is subtly different, and perhaps more intractable: “identity” has become ever more narrowly and rigidly defined, and the point seems all too often not to be the *dissolution* of the dichotomous conceits of Self and Other (Christian and Muslim, European and Arab, and so forth) but its *hardening*. Edward Said’s extraordinarily influential *Orientalism* (which appeared in 1978) radically altered the intellectual landscape in ways not only I but many others believed would help clarify how we think about cultures and their identities, and alert us to the kind of prejudice vis-à-vis Arab culture I had seen as the principal culprit. But I believe many of its premises have instead been almost perversely understood and absorbed as arguments for a greater, rather than a lesser, degree of cultural and scholarly “purity.”

As with many seminal insights in intellectual history (one thinks immediately of “the anxiety of influence” or “the structures of scientific revolutions”) Said’s key concepts have suffered reductive simplification and, in my opinion, damaging misapplication, although it would be dangerous and unfair to necessarily attribute any of these views to Said himself. The brilliance of the original work lay in its setting out the ways in which disciplines are rooted principally in ideologies, in cultural constructs that define one culture’s view of itself vis-à-vis another.² But among the many ironies that abound in the institutionalisation of Said’s analyses is that the thrust of the argument has become that any student (reader, interpreter, speaker) of another’s language

2 The huge prooftext at hand for Said is of course “Orientalism,” a term that existed before as a more or less neutral designation of the study of cultures of the Middle East principally, but which became, in the aftermath, a term so powerfully tainted by Said’s often compelling denunciation of it as an instrument of imperial domination and as a mode of reductive analysis of a whole culture that was diminishing rather than celebratory, that it is scarcely useable any more except as a negative, an accusation. Many universities’ departments, including what was the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, where I studied Arabic, have in fact changed their names as a result.

(literature, culture) is virtually by definition indulging in a species of "orientalism" and is per force treating the other as an "Other." The widespread acceptance of this sophistry dovetailed perfectly with what I perceive as the most damaging institutional development in literary and cultural studies: nationalisation. This division into discrete national languages —of not just our departments but of our visions of cultures and our ways of reading literatures— has become the sad hallmark of our times, and it has rendered the problem of understanding and appreciating complex cultural entities, even more difficult, I think, than "mere" prejudice ever did. Our fractured visions are more fractured than they were ten and twenty years ago and are now overtly hostile to notions of cultural empires and seems to be mostly seeking to identify and champion the most discrete and least ambiguous "identities."

And it is, to say the least, ironic, that all of this has happened at precisely the historical moment at which we should, if anything, see clearly the absurd premises and tragic consequences of these urges to so neatly define "identity." The recent tragedy of the destruction of the last iteration of the Ottoman Empire, the mutilation of Yugoslavia into "national" sectors, with its attendant denials (including genocidal ones) of religious and cultural tolerances and admixtures and kinships must be seen —although it rarely is— as a lamentable repetition of the end of the medieval era so powerfully marked by the year 1492. That year that does best represent *not* merely simple hatred of "others" — it is all too easy, and fundamentally false, to see it as the simple expulsion of "Jews" and the repression of "Islam" which will lead to the expulsion of "Arabs." What 1492 best represents (and I have written about this at some length in *Shards of Love*, a book that I think of as a "sequel" to *The Arabic Role*) is the utter fallacy of such reductive notions of identities, notions based on the false belief that there really are (or were) such essentially pure identities and that they should be "understood" as such: in political reality by the (often bloody) assertion of their sectors of dominance, and in the intellectual realm by the elevation of such divisions as the principal paradigms and divisions of our expertise and interest. And whether the impetus and justification for these assertions of essentially uncontaminated identity come from "old-fashioned" prejudice or newly-chic identity politics —from anti-Semitism, in other words, or from the current practice of studying "Jewish" literature (or some diabolical combination of the two)— the results are disastrous and blinding.

They blind us to the fact that, at least in the history of "the West," which we are still writing, cultural achievements of transcendent value are rarely "pure." And that even when political realities "successfully" impose such divisions into clear-cut identities — when Spain in

1492 expels its Jews and in 1609 its Muslims, when Israel is defined as a Jewish state, when Yugoslavia is carved up as it has been — the “success” is dependent on the radical falsification of history, the denial of the fact that Jews had been Spaniards for a millennium and were native Arabic speakers, or the denial of the fact that Arabs may be Christian and speak Hebrew as a native tongue, or the denial of the fact that Europe today (not to speak of America) is peopled with Muslims who are originally of every conceivable ethnicity, some of them, indeed, originally and “authentically” as European as any Christian. The “success” of orthodoxies of all sorts must always be read against the far more complex and tragic truths that sometimes only literature reflects. When Cervantes publishes part I of the *Quixote*, in 1605 — it is at a moment in Spanish history (called the “Siglo de Oro” or “Golden Age” by Hispanists) when Spain is theoretically the monolingual and religiously uniform modern nation — he begins that greatest of the novels of the European tradition by revealing that the book is actually a “translation.” But even the lovely conceit of the translation, which at first sight we think is rather simply executed from “Arabic” to “Spanish” by a Morisco (what we call sixteenth-century Spaniards who clung to the Islamic faith of their ancestors even though most of them did not, in fact, know Arabic) is as much more complex as the realities that are every day denied. The subtler truth, which remains half-veiled in that most subtle of literary texts, is that the “original” text is itself impossibly corrupt: it is no doubt an “aljamiado” text, written in the noble but soon to be forgotten Arabic script, in a language that is the apocalyptic Spanish-laced-with-Arabic language that was one of Spain’s very real languages, even when its existence was officially forbidden — and then finally expelled in 1609. But exiles have a way of being the condition of literature — and past and future exiles lie at the very beginning and at the heart of the adventures of the wandering Don Quixote. And it is perhaps in the full embracing of the revelations and virtues of exile, and of the rejection of the nationalisms and other illusory orthodoxies of identity that have taken over literary and cultural studies in these last several decades, that we can read the past more truthfully.

The best work that has been done in the past decade, and that is likely to be done in the near future, on “Muslims” and “Arabic culture” in medieval (or, for that matter, modern) Europe, must be either implicitly or explicitly rooted in the rejection of the simplicities and isolations of its own categories and terms, in an appreciation of the profound ambivalences of such readily nameable identities, and of the necessary interconnectedness with other (equally ambivalent) identities. Among the most important recent publications are a series of translations and

reprintings of very old works that reflect and dwell on the complexities of religious-literary identities: the republication in post-Franco Spain of Miguel Asín Palacios' controversial masterpiece *La escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia*, which first appeared in 1919, followed close-on by its first translation into Italian, and translations, for the first time in both modern Spanish and modern Italian, of the Arabic *mi'rāj* text which existed, in Dante's lifetime, in Latin and vernacular translation, and which Asín posits played a pivotal role in Dante's thinking and writing on the imaginative structure of the afterlife.³

The translations of this remarkable and central text, after some five hundred years of widespread inaccessibility, reveal the other virtue that must be cultivated, a virtue clearly championed by Hugh of St. Victor: translation of every sort, and languages that explicitly speak intelligibly to others. And it is in that spirit (and in the rejection of the orthodoxies of national-language departments that claim that we can only know and read in "original" languages, as well as the disciplinary orthodoxy that makes scholars write in languages that are only readable to the minuscule clan of which they are a part) that the other most important development in this decade has been the publication of translations of the multifaceted "Jewish" poetry of al-Andalus. These volumes of translations with invaluable introductions, as well as a limited number of important studies stand in stark (and rebuking) contrast to those of the Arabic-Romance *muwashshahāt* with which they are inextricably linked.

While "kharja" studies became a wasteland of ever more specialised and unreadable technical minutia, turned ever further inwards and a prudish mockery of the original spirit of poetic and linguistic promiscuity that bred that exquisitely hybrid poetry, a handful of scholars and translators (Pagis, Scheindlin, Brann, Cole) who openly embraced the virtues of exile that permeate the culture of the Andalusian Jewish community have produced a growing body of work that is opened outwards instead.⁴ Among the many benefits of these marvelously door-opening studies —and among the delicious ironies— is that the non-specialist (which means anyone who has not done a decade's training as an Arabist) is far more likely to get a sense of the richness and openness of *Arabic* poetry and culture in al-Andalus from those vol-

3 *Il Libro della scala di Maometto*, trans. Roberto Rossi Testa (Milan, 1991), and *Libro de la escala de Mahoma*, trans. José Luis Oliver Domingo (Madrid, 1996). For full bibliography and a history of the reprintings of the work of Asín Palacios see my review article "An Andalusianist's Last Sigh," *La Corónica* 24.2: 179-189.

4 For a full discussion of all these works see my review article "More Sighs," *La Corónica* 25:1.

umes than from most of the work done by mainstream "Andalusianists" (Spaniards, Arabs and Americans alike), who principally write out of that belated and purifying notion of "Arabism" that so distorts most aspects of European-Arab culture. Al-Andalus produced a culture so "corrupt," in all directions, that its literature even includes iterations as unexpected and complexly veiled as the *Divine Comedy's* relation to the *mi'rāj* tradition, or the varieties of "polymorphism" that are revealed in the poetries of Ibn 'Arabī or Ramon Llull or Judah Halevi.

Indeed, all the other principal fine examples of criticism and scholarship recently published (or that I am aware are being written) are all, like that of Asín and like those revealing the infinite complexities of Sefarad's poetry, centred on the most corrupt and impure texts, and guided by exilic principles: the studies and editions of Luce López Baralt, especially the book-length study of the thoroughly "Islamised" and "Arabised" Catholic saint, San Juan de la Cruz, and her edition of the Morisco "Kama Sutra español"; L. Patrick Harvey's magnificent history of Islamic Spain between 1250 and 1500, which for the first time treats the fate of the Muslim populations of that period as a continuum, regardless of whether they lived in Christian states or Muslim states, as well as his forthcoming sequel, the history of the Moriscos themselves; and the study and edition that Consuelo López-Morillas has recently begun of the only complete Qur'ān translated into Spanish, written in that same *aljamiado* that is the "authentic" original of the Quixote within no more than a few years of Cervantes' text.

In the destruction of the whole of the magnificent library of Sarajevo several years ago, it now appears only one significant book was rescued, the famous manuscript called the "Sarajevo Haggada." A Haggada is of course a prayer book that is, appropriately, the collection of prayers to be said on Passover, the eve of exodus, but despite its name this gorgeous and elaborately illuminated manuscript, considered the best of its kind anywhere in the world, and much treasured by Jews everywhere, is not "Sarajevo" at all, nor "merely" Jewish, but rather "Spanish." And what can "Spanish" possibly mean, what do I mean it to be that is so different from what it seems to be in most other uses of this and other "identity" tags? Made in Spain in the late thirteenth century, it is, to put it most reductively, one of the many reflections of a Jewish culture that flourished and had its Golden Age, the Golden Age, precisely because it adopted the virtues of exile, and found its distinctly impure voice within an Arabic culture that was itself expansive and promiscuous and often exilic itself. It was thus altogether fitting that the precious object, the book that inscribes the story of the exile from Egypt, was carried out of Spain by members of the exiled Sephardic community in 1492 and remained, for the better part of the

subsequent five hundred years, well-protected and cherished inside the Ottoman Empire, itself a remarkable example of the great good of empires, which learn how to absorb and tolerate and intermarry "identities," and which became, after 1492, the place of refuge of most Sephardic Jews and of many Andalusian Muslims. But the manuscript had to be rescued once again, during World War II, and it was when a Muslim curator in Sarajevo, as attached as most Muslims are to the memory of Spain, saved that Spanish Haggada from Nazi butchers.

Surely, the morals of the story are perfectly clear: to understand the richness of our heritage we must be the guardians of the Haggada, the Muslim librarian who was not an Arab, of course, but who in saving the manuscript was fulfilling the best of the promises of Islamic Spain and Europe, and we must be the translators who reveal the exquisite ambivalence and sometimes painful conflict of identity of Judah Halevi, whose poetry is sung in so heavy an Arabic accent, and we must be the guardians and defenders of the interfaith marriage between the Christian girls who sang in corrupt Romance and the refined poets of the Arab courts, which is left inscribed, as a passionate and great love, in the *muwash-shaḥāt*. We must, in other words, reject the falsehoods of nations in our work, and reveal, with the exquisite Ibn ʿArabī, the virtues of what he more simply calls love. "My heart can take on any form," he tells us, and then he simply names those temples at which he prays, the temples that inhabit him: the gazelle's meadow, the monks' cloister, the Torah, the Kaʿba. These are the temples whose priests we need to be, if we are to understand what any of this history is about, and it is only there that there can be any future understanding of the complex "identity" of Europe in the Middle Ages, and almost undoubtedly in its present and future as well.

Yale University