
FOUR RESPONSES TO MARIA ROSA MENOICAL,
Shards of Love: Exile and the Origins of the Lyric
(Durham, N.C., 1994)

*Triumph of a "Failed Medievalist":
Menocal's Fresh Perspective on the Middle Ages*

When first urged to review *Shards of Love: Exile and the Origins of the Lyric*, I scoffed at the thought that an armchair philologist could offer any notes of value on as complicated a set of topics as María Rosa Menocal confronts in her 1994 study. I had said that it was best to leave appraisals to the specialists, yet on a trip to the library a few days later I decided to leaf through *Shards* and, if not pique, at least test my interest. I was more than a little surprised to see, reproduced on the frontispiece, the flirtatious face from the cover of Eric Clapton's famous album, *Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs*. By the time I arrived at the poem by James Douglas Morrison (the preferred *nom de plume* of the former lead singer and lyricist for the Doors), I had reconsidered my refusal to read *Shards*. I could hardly wait to write about it after finding the Prelude's epigraph, lines transcribed from a song by Celia Cruz. I suspect that Menocal employed this combination of highbrow and pop culture not only to illustrate some of the ideas about cultural hierarchy she later elaborates (and that, incidentally, refute the dichotomy) but also to attract readers whose love of lyricism and investment in detonating the literary canon would not necessarily recommend them to a volume on the medieval. A fellow *Cubana*, her sense of medley intrigued me. I began to read *Shards* more as bricolage than literary theory, yet it soon became clear that Menocal had produced a feat of both.

Shards of Love begins as the Middle Ages end. Long celebrated as the birth date of modernity, 1492 recalls not only the nativity of the New World, but also the beating death of an old one; in Europe alone, it witnessed the final banishment of the Jews from Spain as well as the definitive Reconquest of Morisco lands on the Iberian peninsula and the first publication of a Castilian grammar. The fact that all three events occurred within the same year, and the commencement of Discovery and Diaspora probably on the same day, has not penetrated the Western consciousness except, perhaps, as apocrypha. The evocative locution used as the title of Part I, "the horse latitudes," signifies those still

spots on the high seas where crews threw overboard all cargo—even invaluable horses—that threatened to weigh down the ship. Menocal uses “horse latitude” to signify those climacteric historical moments that lie outside federal memory, the dialects flung as slang from the official tongue. “Good and smooth paper is made from the pulp of the illiterate and undisciplined,” she reminds us. “Order is made from chaos, and we call it History.” Menocal deftly addresses the purported cultural dimness of the medieval era, an obscurity that lends credence to the term ‘Enlightenment’; the retrogressive character of the Middle Ages as caricatured by even the most eminent historians, and that serves to elevate modern times by frequent comparison, comes under her close scrutiny.

At the beginning of “The Horse Latitudes,” Menocal submits that both medieval historiography and the postmodern resist the pretence of objectivity that modern historians value. A central motif, the notion that historical perspective has fostered a cruel estrangement between us and the culture of the present, as well as that of the distant past, probably provided Menocal with the main impetus to write *Shards*. For those who would accuse Menocal of sentimental anachronism, she points out that the concept has little significance to those intimate with the historical synchronicities of the Middle Ages. She would reply, as *Shards* asserts, that we need not accept the linear, diachronic mode of history as the only one, and that applying a historiographical paradigm derived from the Renaissance to the medieval appears incongruous at best. Through *Shards*, she struggles with the burden of the *grands récits*, the “big stories” of modernity, that purport to account for diverse cultural phenomena. Articulated by a narrative that regards progress as the protagonist, lyrical episodes that disrupt the historian’s sense of a logical plot are ignored or worse, made to fit the theme. *Shards* here implicitly deals with the contradictions of a postmodern philology, at a time when, among others following Nietzsche, Foucault has derided the quest for origins in themselves as a misguided pursuit. His model of genealogy, or “effective history,” comes closest to describing what Menocal offers us.¹ In her hands, history, its coherence, seamlessness, and naturalness, gives way to genealogy: cacophonous, polyvocal, dissonant. And true to life.

1 “‘Descent’ (*Herkunft*), as opposed to ‘origin’ (*Ursprung*), does not posit ‘an original identity’ but destabilises the very notion of the ‘origin.’ Genealogy, or ‘effective history,’ refuses to search out ‘origins,’ because an ‘origin,’ a ‘genesis,’ always involves a Fall.” Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, tr. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, 1980) 142.

This “failed Arabist” has gone far to honour the Jewish and Moorish influences in what we term “Spanish” literature, and figures such as Ibn Rushd not only as collaborators in but creators of Western culture. In so doing, she copes with the difficulty of ascribing influence, the delicacy that her attempts to name precursors entails. Menocal also draws suggestive parallels between contemporary Latin American and medieval Arabic literature as sites of productive, if often disconcerting, hybridity. The *muwashshaḥa*, a song composed in grammatical Arabic and framed by refrains in the vernacular, becomes a symbol of the Middle Ages itself as well as its literary dynamism (in form, content, and—that most neglected of attributes-function). Menocal puts Salman Rushdie forward as the sort of medieval (as opposed to Renaissance) man whose prototypes, the cosmopolitan Arabs of al-Andalus, flourished before the fall of Granada. Although she mentions Jorge Luis Borges only in passing, we could summon the large Argentine writer as the latter day counterpart of Ramon Llull: called the first postmodern author, he nonetheless admired as well as wrote about Averroës and incorporated elements of medieval Jewish mysticism into short stories located in *film noir* Rio de Janeiro. His was not the historians’ fatal misstep, to hold only the times and songs of another age as worthy of embraces.

She tellingly entitles two essays of her volume “Scandal” and “Desire.” In the first she sees the amatory language between “lover” and “beloved,” a staple of mystical literature, with new, open eyes. Most would say that the language of worship merely borrows tropes from the suitor and that courtly poetry stole its metaphors from matins; Menocal resists the distinction between the profane and the sacred. She does not only aim to blur those boundaries but to show that both Ramon Llull and Ibn ‘Arabī (whose image posterity has tried to rehabilitate, not entirely successfully) believed quite the opposite. She goes on to lament the betrayal of the lyric by the criticism that would elucidate it: paraphrase its poetry in prose, reduce its conundrums to reason, and later, assimilate the radical into the establishment. Menocal masterfully charts the horse latitudes of literary criticism, but now the animals cast overboard are those inimical to convention. The very hermeticism of certain verse becomes a political act, by defying those prosaic institutions that would absorb even poetry into itself. She answers the question of how to read mystical poetry, what hermeneutic to impose on it, with a response startlingly similar to her advice on how to “read” the Middle Ages: indulge the poet at least until the end of the verse. Dante emerges as a model reader and hence the inventor of Romance philology, whose elevation of the vernaculars to the level of the classical languages, and beyond, made this discourse possible. Born of

exile, his efforts to advance the cause of the vulgar lyric reveal the profound ideological and political implications of any canonical project. The contribution made by *Shards* towards the recognition of this truth (despite hypocritical complaints from academe to the contrary) has urgency and profound consequence for students of cultural studies, history, comparative literature, and any number of other disciplines.

Menocal also offers an alternative to the reams of endnotes that any enterprise of her scope would normally generate. "Readings and Sources" cites not only the other writers and *œuvres* that have influenced *Shards*, but also discusses where it and other seminal studies part company. Menocal warns that these commentaries are aimed at a narrower audience than the rest of *Shards*, yet I welcomed the anecdotes and documentation as an added resource; nowhere does her erudition give way to pedantry. Although I must admit that here some of her best critical salvos went over my head, they did seem rather compelling soaring past. Indeed, after reading "Readings and Sources," I could no more confirm the accuracy of comparisons between a musical superstar and "the first modern man" than before, but I appreciated the ingenuity of this and other controversial claims. Since Menocal has the highest regard for those poets that wrote analyses of their own poems in prose, as a concession to the lamentable primacy of secondary sources over the primary, it seems fitting that *Shards* should conclude with a similar gesture. The word that best describes it, and the volume as a whole, is "fresh": breathless, original, defiant of its elders, and *ripe*. Any scholar aspiring to freshness would do well to read *Shards of Love*. For some, of course, the epigraph from Celia Cruz may be inducement enough.

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Return from Exile

The fire of your abandon is to the Lover like the flames of hell; but union with
 You, if You come, is like the garden of paradise . . .

It is as though a full moon carries the wine and breezes, and the two hands of the
 drinker are a halo . . .

Fantasy draws near to the Desired One, far away from daily concerns, and
 fantasies burst forth . . .

The phantom serves drink for a second time —the heart of a destiny of permanent
 bewitchment by him— and the soul is left with longing.

Perhaps if the anguish of the night returns to my reproach, the culmination of
 desire will be achieved,

Until the excellence of the spectre flees with it, and perhaps You believed in these
 fantasies.

Abū al-Faḥlibn Ḥasday, eleventh century²

On reading *Shards of Love* for the second time, I was reminded of Alberto Moravia's Mario di Sio, who dozed fitfully through his flight to Rome clutching a volume of poems by Apollinaire. Mario the poet has not yet written (and may never write) a single poem: Apollinaire, as he explains to the amused and ironic Jeanne, has already written the poems he would like to write. What to say after Apollinaire?

I also felt vindicated: I, too, draw the map of the Middle Ages à la Braudel, and its upper limits barely reach above the Poitiers so staunchly defended against the Other by a very Christian Charlemagne (who, by the way, not only made it into the "Great Narrative" but became one of the figures it most lovingly mythicises). His Muslim adversary, tellingly, remains nameless in the *chansons de geste* which rewrite the battle in epic proportions.

Menocal's invitation to reconsider our ideas concerning the "medieval" should be accepted with alacrity by all scholars of European and/or Mediterranean history and culture, whether "Byzantinists," "Islamicists," or ... "Medievalists." And we should all, perhaps, feel a little embarrassed by the incongruencies of the arbitrary taxonomy in which we, often unthinkingly, participate. Her eloquent pleas for a remodelling of the pedagogical House that Nationalism Built on the none-too-steady foundations of the Great Narrative should also be heeded. Menocal encourages us to reconsider our location of centres, to remember that al-Andalus was very much in the medieval mainstream (as were Palermo and Jerusalem), while the Île-de-France only came into its own as "centre" riding the blood-tipped crests of waves of thirteenth-century repressions and exorcisms. Even in the most recent editions of texts which introduce students to the History of Art (and let it be said that editors, bending under the pressure of post-modern multiculturalism, have hastened to include chapters which embrace the Islamic/African/Hindu/Far Eastern Other) unconsciously defer to the Narrative's designation of Centres. The Civilisations of Greece and Rome are accorded generous portions of paper, while their "neighbours" must subdivide the already-cramped quarters of one slim

2 Al-Maqqārī, *Analectes sur la histoire et la littérature des arabes d'Espagne*, ed. R. Dozy et al. (Reprint: Amsterdam, 1967), vol. I, pp. 422-423. My translation from the Arabic.

chapter. This teleology of the classical-into-classicising feeds seamlessly into the climactic achievements of *The Romanesque* and *The Gothic*. These phenomena (the canonising of those two terms is yet another issue that Menocal's book demands we reconsider) are explored in exhaustive and caressing detail, while Islam and its visual culture are dispatched neatly and forthwith in a few (very) economic (not to say reductive) pages ... All this without even going into the issue of why chapter divisions, regardless of contemporaneity and interaction of the material they contain, are neatly cut along the lines of national frontiers.

Students whose induction into the History of Art has been guided by such texts enter into deeper examination of the "Medieval" with their perception of this epoch's centres coloured by the Great Narrative's nostalgia for Things Classical. Faces expressed hesitation when, in a survey class I taught recently, I asked if everyone understood why, in a course listed under the History of Art, we were reading *Shards of Love*. There were several seconds of cumbersome silence before a few heads nodded affirmatively; no comment was offered. Halfway through the course, however, during the first round of class presentations, Menocal's exploration of the meanings attached to (and the limitations placed on) the term "medieval," as well as her arguments concerning the enlightened tolerance of eleventh-century "fragmentation," were invoked more than once as students presented their impressions of pseudo-Kufic lettering employed to decorate the exteriors of churches in Greece, or wooden panels from a Coptic convent which so exactly resemble elements from a Fatimid palace as to be indistinguishable from their secular counterparts.

I also feel grateful for Menocal's justification of my own choice of research topics: the Taifa kingdoms provide one of the most eloquent examples of her culturally fertile "fragmentation," of a lyrical tear in the painstakingly woven, coloured-silk Narrative of the History of al-Andalus. For Andalusian studies, although unremittingly marginalised by both Europeanists and Islamicists, has not been spared its *own* version of the Great Narrative: al-Andalus achieves its cultural zenith in the form of Cordoban Glory (nestled intimately against an inherent preference for the cohesion of Empire over the chaos of non-Empire) of the Cordoban Caliphate, the Islamic political institution which managed to spread itself the thinnest and farthest over the soil of the Iberian peninsula. With the demise of the Cordoban Caliphate and Its Culture, these two become the unattainable Beloveds courted ever after (unsuccessfully, of course) by a moribund al-Andalus which, to paraphrase a colleague's somewhat unflattering characterisation of Taifa culture, was so depleted by internecine strife between kingdoms (the

adjective “petty” is often trotted out here) and against the Other that it was scarcely equal to the task of clinging desperately to Cordoban Grandeur, let alone capable of inventing anything new.

The Great Narrative diligently woven for al-Andalus (thus allowing its students to feel themselves the true kith and kin of those at the Romanesque, Gothic, or Eastern Islamic Centres of Things) is rendered seamless by the widely-accepted assumption that Andalusian Islam was always an Orthodox (i.e., Sunni, and usually Maliki) one: an assumption which certainly appears to be true if one considers the Caliphal, Almoravid, Almohad, or Nasrid cases. The orthodox Narrative reads smoothly indeed if we take an especially deep breath before reeling off that list, and if we slur the word “Taifa,” which should come between “Caliphal” and “Almoravid” (well, you can’t do it if you use the Arabic “*mulūk al-ṭawāʾif*,” but everyone uses the Spanish word anyway).

If we want to maintain the comfortable (and righteous) association of al-Andalus with the Sunna, it doesn’t pay to look too closely at the *mulūk al-ṭawāʾif*. For the *mulūk al-ṭawāʾif* represent Menocal’s rupture in the smooth Narrative of al-Andalus’ history. Heresy, in the lyrical form of the *muʿtazila*, and even the *shīʿa*, entered port cities such as Malaga and, once the detaining hand of Empire had been banished, spread northward on lazy waves of economic prosperity and the surprised ease of running things on a regional, rather than a peninsular, scope.

It was perhaps because I had recently finished reading *Shards of Love* for the first time that I caught my breath when I found a statement in al-Maqqarī’s *Analectes* concerning the father of one of the Hammudi “caliphs,” a dynasty centred in Malaga during the first decades of the eleventh century: *kāna ab ūhu maʿrūfan bi-tashshīʿihi* — “his father was known for his Shiʿism.” My puzzlement over the seemingly unfair ganging-up of a number of larger Taifa states on the petite Malaga was suddenly jarred into coherence: nobody wanted to have to answer to a Shiʿi caliph. The sober fabric of the Narrative had been ripped, and through that tiny but elastic opening entered all manner of Menocalian, lyrical voices. The *badīʿ* style of poetry, based on a hermetic assumption of the transformational powers of metaphor and firmly associated with sundry heresies successfully banished from public view in a newly reactionary Baghdad some two centuries earlier, was favoured — indeed, flouted — by the self-styled Hammudi imams. Taifa kings of post-1050 threw down their swords and settled themselves to quaff wine with boon companions, ruby-red wine poured by the effeminate hand, the delicately curved wrist, of a nubile male cup-

bearer, gazelle in the king's garden of delights, *houri* in the arcane paradise reserved for the fortunate few. And the mystical (lyrical, unorthodox, anarchistic, anti-Narrative) implications of this scenario are not coincidental. More than one poet enthusiastically penned the word *fanā'* ("mystical annihilation of the self") in an effort to describe—often, as in Menocal's reading of Ibn 'Arabī, in terms of confusing opposites against whose facile exegesis we must vigilantly guard—the indescribable (and here, Menocal's pointing out of unmistakable Qur'anic associations bolstered my confidence in the puzzle I was slowly piecing together), to render the unrenderable, to tell of the untellable (Paradisic) pleasures to be had in the presence of the Beloved (King).

Taifa reality was indeed a fractured one, a fragmented one, a plural one, a Menocalian one: not one Narrative History was produced under the patronage of Taifa sovereigns, and no one requested the spinning of a Seamless Story. Drunken requests for "descriptions" such as that found in the opening passage of this essay, however, were plentiful. Taifa history is told in the raucous voice of the drinking song, in the heart-rending signs of unrequited love, and in the sweet tongues of fantasy in which, as Abū al-Faḥl intimates in a seductive whisper in the final *bait* of his *khamriyya*, "perhaps You have believed."

It is to be hoped that *Shards of Love* will make its way onto the list of required reading for every course whose title contains the word "medieval," and that Menocal's brilliant and lyrical study will encourage the fragmentation of our laboriously constructed reading of the "medieval" material we study.

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Romance, Lyric, Exile: Picking up the Pieces

Part of the glory of comparative literature is the list of things it does without. It has "no set languages or texts, no necessary borders, no temporal constraints or narrative shapes" (*Shards of Love*, p. 137), no permanent theoretical base, and a lineage mostly composed of maverick and unrepeatable characters. The discipline may be defined through comparison, but the practitioners are by and large "Incomparables" fit to perform in Raymond Roussel's *Impressions d'Afrique*. To adopt the rules and limitations of an existing piece of comparative work for a new book would be to miss the point, rather as if athletes were to re-enact the great sports records rather than surpassing them. "Hopelessly idiosyncratic and inherently lyric in its structures, as well as aggressively

contingent" (ibid.), comparative literature is really the sum of its occasions. If you seek a continuous history, an epic enchainment of causes and effects, look to other disciplines.

María Menocal's *Shards of Love* acknowledges this condition and defies it by constructing—and I do mean constructing—an origin myth that turns its back on origins and causes. The story she tells about the emergence of comparative literature is always compounded out of the conflict of two rival origin myths. There is, for example, Curtius, whose scholarly project was to record "the good tradition that has survived all along and that has provided—like an underground river—a unity and a continuum that will survive" the splintering of Europe into mutually unintelligible dialects and ideologies (135). Curtius needed to revive Latin, and of course Rome, where all roads lead, even as a merely virtual common ground; and because he saw his project as historical, he needed to grant Latin and its empire the causal priority of a determining fact. And then there is Auerbach—or for that matter Dante, Pound, or Spitzer, the portrait is composite anyway—whose attention is all focused on the lyrical instants into which the Latinate epic shatters as it gives way to the vulgar tongues, the heretical doctrines, the solipsisms of courtly love. Romance philology is a knowledge of the lyrical, through the lyrical, and brought on by the singular experience of exile. For Menocal, the revival of Latin (or of any other unifying project) always threatens to transpose itself into the Reconquista, with its consequences in the banishing of the Moors and the Jews. Auerbach's exile is multiple. It is also Eric Clapton's, Nizami's, Dante's, and (had Petrarch only understood vernacular song better) Petrarch's. It is the exclusion whereby the lyric separates from the epic and, if it is ambitious and *revanchard* enough, begins to assume new hybrid narrative shapes.

Menocal's book is yet another attempt to discover the shape whereby the lyrical can represent the public, inheritable, continuous logic of epic narration without being crushed. (On this shape-shifting, see p. 147.) In its persistent dualism, in its restlessness, and also in its repetitions, it recalls Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*. The occasional references to the history and passions of its author and the asserted "scandal" of discussing rock and roll side by side with the *trobar clus* may be intended to set up another of those lyric coincidences whereby Nietzsche/ Auerbach/ Menocal will find his/her Wilamowitz/Curtius.

Romance philology and its recent offshoot, comparative literature, repeat in their intellectual gestures those of the medieval poets they are always returning to study; even to tell the story is to reconstitute the form that the story has always taken. The origin story is a repetitive and discontinuous myth, and in that its properly mythic character

comes forth: it doesn't hold up as an explanation, only as a pattern. If the claim is that the lyric emerges from exile, does this necessarily amount to Platonising the concepts of Lyric and Exile? Is that the cost of lining up Nizami, Dante, the Jews of 1492, Auerbach, and Clapton? A theory of the lyric genre (on which Plato would cast his inevitable shadow) is the last thing on Menocal's mind: Greek lyric, Chinese personal poetry and other supposed comparables are absent from the book. And one important pivot category, orality, does its work here with hardly any discussion: it seems that apart from serving as a rebuff to the permanent univocity desired by a bookish culture, orality needs no special definition. Without consideration of these questions, of course, Menocal keeps her argument suspended, sometimes delightfully, sometimes bothersomely, between rule and contingency. Is it lyric or Lyric, Exile or exiles? Facing up to the need to choose would have given us all more to argue about — lyrically, but not solipsistically.

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Endnote

One evening, half asleep on a banquette in a bar, just for fun I tried to enumerate all the languages within earshot: music, conversations, the sounds of chairs, glasses, a whole stereophony of which a square in Tangiers (as described by Severo Sarduy) is the exemplary site. That too spoke within me, and this so-called "interior" speech was very like the noise of the square, like that amassing of minor voices coming to me from the outside: I myself was a public square, a *sook*; through me passed words, tiny syntagms, bits of formulae, and *no sentence formed*, as though that were the law of such a language.

The Pleasure of the Text,³ p. 49

Roland Barthes, describing an experience of language divorced from the hermeneutic urge to analyse and interpret, uses "a square in Tangiers" as the emblem of that experience. The cacophony of the square is central to the vignette: the simultaneous perception of a number of different "languages," some of them linguistically or culturally specific ("music, conversations"), some not ("the sounds of chairs, glasses"). The writer perceives these "languages" without making any effort to translate

3 Trans. Richard Miller, (New York, 1975).

them; he does not repeat the utterances he hears, nor interpret their content for his own benefit or for ours. This “speech” —he goes on to characterise it as “at once very cultural and very savage”— exists outside syntactic order, “*outside the sentence*”: not mediated by the rules of “linguistics which believes only in the sentence” (*Pleasure of the Text*, 49), untranslated, it is experienced as pure physical sensation.

Barthes’ Tangiers seems a particularly appropriate place to stand in order to respond to *Shards of Love*. Barthes invokes the “square in Tangiers” as exemplary of a confusion of linguistic orders so pitched that it evades the hierarchy of the sentence. His choice is suggestive: no fortuitous convergence of languages and cultures occurs in Tangiers, but rather the jarring juxtaposition of the Muslim and Christian worlds, of the French and Arabic tongues, legacy of the colonial activities of the French in North Africa (and this detail would not escape Barthes, who taught French in Egypt). A closer reading of the passage, however, reveals an additional layer of complexity. Barthes does not necessarily locate himself in Tangiers. He sits “on a banquette in a bar,” but does not tell us where. Severo Sarduy, the Cuban novelist who lived for most of his life in Paris, takes us to Tangiers; and Sarduy’s written, fictional account of the Moroccan square echoes through Barthes’ consciousness, along with the music, the conversations, the sounds of chairs and glasses (did he remember Sarduy’s description in Spanish, or in French translation?). This encounter of oral text and written, of Muslim world and Christian, of Old World and New, stands *outside the sentence*, the emblem of an exhilarating, an isolate and unrepeatable, escape from the hierarchy of grammar.

The world that Menocal describes in *Shards of Love* is in the neighbourhood of Barthes’ Tangiers: polyvocal, polylingual, her *al-Andalus* is a place where languages encounter each other; though she describes (and participates in) a constant and restless effort to translate between them, their encounters produce an excess of meaning which continues to elude the normative domestications of translation, the “hierarchy of grammar.” Thus it seemed appropriate, rather than commission a single respondent to produce a single, totalising review of her book, to invite a series of responses, in order to explore the work from multiple perspectives. Two of the foregoing responses to *Shards of Love* were written by scholars who do not work on medieval topics; two of them were written by scholars whose concentration is not literary. And each respondent is at a different stage in his or her career, and thus brings a different level of experience and a different set of expectations to his or her reading of the book. Elizabeth Pérez is a graduate student of religious history at the University of Chicago Divinity School, familiar with the rigors of comparatist study, though accustomed to a different

disciplinary approach; Cynthia Robinson is Adjunct Professor of Art History at the University of Pennsylvania, and has written on and taught medieval Andalusian cultural history; and Haun Saussy, author of *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic* (Stanford University Press, 1993) and Professor of modern Chinese and Comparative Literature at Stanford University, has written on the problems and possibilities that arise when radically disparate literary traditions are paralleled.

This plural response to Menocal's book, by virtue of its very plurality, throws into greater relief one of the difficulties her project encounters, and one that is noted by the respondents. Menocal problematizes the "*grands récits*" of medieval literary and cultural history, and in particular the narrative that tells us that "European" literature rose from the ashes of the Latin literary tradition. In its place she works to piece together an account of medieval literary history reflecting the contribution of the Arabs who inhabited the Iberian peninsula and Sicily to the cultural traditions that would use the nascent Romance vernaculars as their medium and, indeed, the banners of their identity. Haun Saussy points out a potential difficulty inherent in Menocal's project: she dismantles one Grand Narrative in order to replace it with another, and in so doing runs the risk of a different, but no less pernicious, sort of essentialism. It is a problem that postmodern critics working in the most disparate of disciplines have encountered, repeatedly: we can evoke isolate and unrepeatably moments of "bliss" — what Menocal characterises as lyric temporality; what Pérez, in her response above, connects to Nietzsche's concept of genealogy; what Barthes calls "Tangiers" — but we cannot *do anything* with them without implicating them in the very hierarchies which we treasure them for evading.

It has become a convention, in writing about the discipline of Medieval Studies, to note that the Middle Ages lay forgotten — or, more precisely, half-remembered — for many centuries. When scholars began to think and write systematically about the period, producing the monumental nineteenth-century studies of medieval history, literature, and languages, they worked under the influence of the Romantic nationalisms. During the diaspora of the Holocaust era, European scholars in North America (and in Istanbul) laboured to define and codify the discipline and its methodologies, and, inevitably, recreated Europe from a distance, an ideal Europe healed of the terrible wounds inflicted by Nazism and World War II. As schematic and reductive as this *grand récit* is, it is surprisingly accurate and helps to account for some of the habits and assumptions that have defined (and, some would say, hobbled) the discipline — what Robinson, in her response above, terms "the House that Nationalism Built." Scholars who work on the cultural history of the borderlands of southern Europe inhabit a landscape

dominated by crumbling monuments and ghosts: the half-remembered Middle Ages (Charlemagne's Muslim adversaries, immortalised in the *chansons de geste*, mentioned above by Robinson [and see also Suzanne Conklin Akbari's article in this issue]), the reconstructed Middle Ages (Auerbach's beautiful, triumphalist account of the emergence of the Romance vernaculars from the desiccated Latin tradition, for instance). Is it possible to reinscribe the figure of "the Muslim" in this landscape without participating in the essentialisms of a totalising *grand récit*?

Robinson mentions Moravia's fictional character, whose poetry has already been written by Apollinaire. Pérez cites Borges, the great cultural recycler, as the modern counterpart of Menocal's Ramon Llull; certainly Borges offers an intriguing alternative to Moravia's Mario di Sio in his Pierre Menard, who counters di Sio's exhaustion with optimism: he sets out on the monumental and, arguably, futile project of re-writing the *Don Quixote*, striving to recreate Cervantes' masterpiece word for word. We may find yet another literary model for our situation vis-à-vis the past—our compulsion to contain, describe, and repeat it—in the figure of Scheherazade, who retells the stories she has heard, but within the containing structure of a frame story which invests her repeated tales with a difference: she repeats in order to seduce. Relating her bedtime tales to her sister, with her husband as "casual" auditor—we imagine him, that first night, waking to the rhythms of the opening tale, half-awake and half-listening, passing from dreamtime to storytime so imperceptibly that he does not begrudge the sleep he misses—she understands that repetition is never innocent; she tells the old stories one more time in order to put the beast to sleep, and waken the moribund city.

When Barthes writes "I myself was a public square, a *sook*," he does not imitate a single, transcendent and culturally neutral space: the reader imagines him as a kind of palimpsest, in which the grand, rational architectural rhythms of a French square and the fluid functionality of a *sūq* are layered. We, as cultural historians, must repeat the past; and where it has been so wilfully misunderstood, it seems that we have a responsibility to seduce (as Menocal understands very well), in order to demonstrate the possibility of translation between cultural traditions long thought of as mutually incomprehensible. We should also, of course, recognise our accounts, our "translations" of historical text and event, as contingent: the seduction always occurs between two individuals—between Muslim and Christian; between *sūq* and square; between orality and literacy; between Middle Ages and modernity—and the personal and cultural predilections of the players leave their traces in the script of the seduction. The poem by Abū al-Faḥl ibn Hasday quoted above by Robinson memorialises such a seduction, one that

blinds us momentarily to the boundary between the secular order and the mystical, and is interrupted (like Scheherazade's tales) when light dispels the shadows. The poet himself does us the service of reminding us, gently, that we have been seduced, of pointing out the context (and thus the contingencies) of the seduction, when he concludes his performance with a stage-whispered farewell that serves, also, as a wake-up call: *and perhaps you —drowsy reader— have believed in these fantasies.*

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