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THE POETICS OF LOSS IN ANTONIO MUÑOZ
MOLINA'S "¡OH TÚ QUE LO SABÍAS" / "OH YOU, WHO
KNEW SO WELL," from *Sefarad*

España es un sitio casi inexistente de tan remoto, un país inaccesible, desconocido, ingrato, llamado Sefarad, añorado con una melancolía sin fundamento ni disculpa, con una lealtad tan asidua como la que se fueron pasando de padres a hijos los antecesores del señor Isaac Salama, el único de todo su linaje que cumplió el sueño heredado del regreso para ser expulsado otra vez y ya definitivamente, por culpa de un infortunio....

(Spain is so remote that it is nearly nonexistent, an inaccessible, unknown, thankless country they called Sepharad, longing for it with a melancholy without basis or excuse, with a loyalty as constant as that passed from father to son by the ancestors of Señor Salama, the only one of his line to fulfill the hereditary dream of return, only to be expelled once again, and this time definitively, because of a misfortune....)

Antonio Muñoz Molina
"Oh tú que lo sabías," *Sefarad*

Sefarad (2001) by the Ubeda (Jaén) writer Antonio Muñoz Molina, who is now director of the Instituto Cervantes in New York City, is a collection of seventeen tales variously woven from themes of banishment, truncation, sexual transgression, epiphany, war, and betrayal. The segments range from thirteen to 51 pages in length. Muñoz Molina's text is a hybrid literary form: narrative fiction and essay. It is a hybridity that has gained currency among contemporary writers of serious Peninsular fiction. Javier Cercas's *Soldados de Salamina* is one highly successful example. However, this particular hybridity is hardly new to Spanish letters, having been practised by such past canonical writers as the Enlightenment's José Cadalso y Vázquez in his *Cartas marruecas* and by the Romantic Mariano José de Larra in his *Artículos de costumbres*. The hybrid form permits the use of historical material in open subjectivity, in contrast with those often more covert subjectivities of the journalist or the historian. Through recontextualisation, play with perspective and sequence, and the confluence of historical and fictional events, this hybrid mode can recast history in illuminating ways. It also offers a rich field of ambiguity upon which fact and fiction, memory

and invention, engage one another in play and in battle, contenders for readerly adherence. Narratorial stance is mutable, shifting, both contributing to and mirroring the hybridity of other textual strategies.

Sefarad is such a text. It is constructed from a second ambiguity, one named in the book's subtitle, *Una novela de novelas*. Muñoz Molina's stories create settings and evoke phenomena associated with the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Nazi appropriation of surrounding nations, Spanish Republican exile and the Republican familial experience in Francoist Spain, the modern metropolis and its rudderless souls, the gradual death of a small Spanish town, and, in three or possibly four of the work's segments, the Sephardic diaspora. Each of the tales of *Sefarad* can stand alone. Yet the stories enter into tacit dialogue with one another, the parallels between character experience of Communist and Fascist totalitarian states constituting an especially rich textual exchange. Historical personages recur before and after the stories centring upon them: Kafka's mistress Milena Jesenka; the German Willie Münzenberg; Hans Mayer alias Jean Améry; Greta Buber-Neumann and her husband, Heinz Neumann, both victims of the Soviet purges. Fictional characters make their own reappearances, perhaps most notably the now-mad figure always seen wearing a green-feathered Tyrolean hat. Furthermore, each of Muñoz Molina's narrative segments moves around an axis of loss. It is sometimes sudden, cataclysmic; in other instances stealthy and slow; in still others it is disguised as normality, simply the way things are. The portrayal of loss is cumulative, its accretions conferring unity. *Sefarad* is, then, as the sum of its parts, both novel and compendium of stories.

I will focus in these pages upon the representation of loss, what I term the poetics of loss, in one of the tales of *Sefarad*, "Oh tú que lo sabías," "Oh You, Who Knew So Well." Quotations from the text to be used in the analysis will be offered first in Muñoz Molina's original Spanish, then parenthetically in English using Margaret Sayers Peden's 2003 translation, from *Sepharad*.

At 43 pages one of the longest of the stories comprising *Sefarad*, the tale is set in North Africa, in Tangiers, where the focaliser and unnamed primary narrator, who is vaguely identified in the tale as a writer, has probably been invited to speak at the Ateneo Español, the Spanish cultural centre. Presiding over that much-debilitated entity is Isaac Salama, the tale's other narrator, a Hungarian Jew, son of Sephardic parents, or at least a Sephardic father. He is the lone, and deeply lonely, survivor, he and his father having escaped from Hungary with Spanish passports, issued in accordance with the Spanish law of 1924 that restored Spanish citizenship to the descendants of the Sephardim. Their flight follows the seizure and disappearance of Isaac's mother and sisters at the hands of the hated Hungarian fascists. Isaac has told the family's story to his visitor. His father had opened a textile business in Tangiers

like the one he had owned in Budapest. Isaac, yearning for escape, had studied, and brilliantly, at university in Spain, then returned to the peninsula with plans to stay. An auto accident on a twisting night road in southern Spain crippled him for life. The new car had been a gift from his father.

Howard Sachar, author of the 2005 *A History of the Jews in the Modern World*, details in his earlier *Farewell España: The World of the Sephardim Remembered* (1994) the complex history of affirmation and negation that characterized down through the centuries the Sephardic presence in present-day Morocco. The Salama father in Muñoz Molina's text acts out during the long Tangiers years a tangled story of his own in a coupling of renunciation and embrace. On the one hand, he insists on carrying on with his son a complete severing from the Hungarian tongue. "...[M]i padre se empeñó en que no volviéramos a hablarla, ni siquiera entre nosotros, entre él y yo, los únicos que habíamos quedado de toda nuestra familia..." (*Sefarad* 167). ([M]y father insisted on never speaking it again, not even between the two of us, the only ones left of our entire family...) [*Sepharad* 110].) Yet to his new textile business he gave the name Galerías Duna, the Hungarian name for the River Danube paired with the Spanish word; his business in Budapest had borne exactly the same name. The father had been a deep admirer of continental culture, yet he now turned his back upon the Europe that had betrayed the family, "...Europa, adonde mi padre ya no quiso nunca volver, la Europa que él había amado sobre todas las cosas y de la que se había enorgullecido..." (*Sepharad* 167) ("...Europe, which my father never wanted to return to, the Europe he had loved above all else and of which he had been so proud... [*Sepharad* 110]). The Salamás now carried "nuestra nueva identidad española" (*Sefarad* 167) ("the new Spanish identity" [*Sepharad* 110]), thanks to which they had escaped, yet ambivalence enters anew. Despite his reverence for his part of Europe, the father raised his children with a sense of their Spanish heritage. "Sefarad era nombre de nuestra patria verdadera aunque nos hubieran expulsado de ella hacía más de cuatro siglos" (*Sefarad* 167) ("Sepharad was the name of our true homeland, although we'd been expelled from it more than four centuries ago" [*Sepharad* 110]), though the elder Salama's knowledge of *ladino* was limited to a lullaby or two. The family was Jewish, yet its members never went to synagogue, and the father knew only a few words in Hebrew. When he rejected Europe, it was "...para convertirse en algo que tampoco era, un judío celoso de la Ley y aislado y huraño entre los gentiles..." (*Sefarad* 167), ("...in order to turn himself into a zealous Orthodox Jew, isolated and reticent among Gentiles..." [*Sepharad* 110]).¹ When tensions rose in Morocco,

¹The Peden translation of this quotation sacrifices an important point of identity and its stubborn multiplicity and elusiveness, no doubt for the sake of flu-

the father saw another expulsion coming.

Sólo espero que nos echen con mejores modales que los húngaros, o que los españoles en 1492.

Dijo eso, los españoles, como si no se considerase ya uno de ellos..." (*Sefarad* 170)

("I only hope they throw us out with better manners than the Hungarians, or the Spanish in 1492.

That's what he said, *the Spanish*, as if he didn't consider himself one of them anymore..." [*Sepharad* 112])

Where, then, was home? The father's two points of identity had been Spain, the family's legendary home, and Hungary/Europe. Both he simultaneously affirmed and repudiated. He came to inhabit no terrain save that last place of failure and loss, the irrevocable, irremediable sacrifice of his loved ones to the Nazi terror in Hungary. His son, too, dwells in his own moment and place of loss, on a train where he met a young woman. On that train, moveable sphere of possibilities, Isaac Salama had, and relinquished, what might, or might not, have been. While his father inhabits a moment of known, cataclysmic loss of nearly all that he knew and cherished, Isaac resides in a moment of ambiguity, kept alive through the years. The father's loss is rendered in silence, the son's in story.

In his rendering of Isaac's tale, Muñoz Molina respects the conventions of the train narrative and prepares the terrain well for readerly reception of Isaac Salama's memory of encounter and loss on a train out of Tangiers. Following Salama's first sonorous recitation to his listener, Muñoz Molina's primary narrator, of the Baudelaire sonnet "À une passante," he seems about to speak. Muñoz Molina causes the scene to be interrupted; the concert at the Ateneo Español is about to begin. There is in this deferral a kind of textual seduction of the reader, a postponement of textual desire, a desire that will be rewarded, as its subject's own desire both is and is not, for he cherishes, in a sense, his (perhaps needed) defeat. Muñoz Molina has his narrator return to the evocation of the Baudelarian sonnet and its importance to Salama only in the concluding passages of "Oh tú que lo sabías" / "Oh You, Who Knew So Well," and it is now that he relates Salama's deferred tale

First, however, Muñoz Molina has recourse to a distancing stratagem. In the easy jocularly of talk among writers travelling by train to a conference in Asturias, someone's mention of Isaac Salama elicits a

idity, in rendering "para convertirse en algo que tampoco era" as "in order to turn himself into a zealous Orthodox Jew...." In the son's view, his father has turned himself from one thing that he was not into something else that he was not, either.

lengthy, colloquial, and mocking evocation of him by one of the authors. Disparaged by this speaker are Salama's old and formal Spanish, the pittance that he as director of the Ateneo Español in Tangiers has been able to offer the visiting speaker, Salama's close attention to his guest and continual accompaniment of him, a hospitality that, come as it may have with the baggage of complaint about conditions in Tangiers, is certainly genuine. The obvious insensitivity in this speaker's burlesque undercuts the validity of his mockery and turns it textually back upon him. Muñoz Molina's narrator thus simultaneously removes himself from any melodrama in the story he will now relate and privileges that very story. This train tale is the concluding portion of the narrative segment of *Sefarad* entitled "Oh tú que lo sabías" / "Oh You, Who Knew So Well." The segment's last line echoes this title and is also the closing line of Baudelaire's sonnet.

While on a business trip, Isaac is enthralled by a lovely young woman who shares his compartment. He, in turn, apparently enthrals her. Keeping his coat tightly around his shrivelled legs and his crutches on the rack above his seat, he does not rise when she leaves, lest she learn of his disability, and lets her go. The train is a mobile world of transitory self-invention, a self-enclosed world but not a permanent one. Here, the destination is not a reincorporation or marker of a new beginning but a rupture, a loss. His coat covers his damaging secret, his shrivelled legs, his self-defined unlovable self, as his charming words, his unaccustomed verbal brilliance, convey a worthier self. His crippled state functions textually as a metaphor for his view of his Jewishness, his coat as his denial of it. (Salama, recalling his flight to Spain, admits that "Se lo digo y me da vergüenza: lo que yo quería era no ser judío" [*Sefarad* 173], "I say it now, to my shame: what I wanted was not to be a Jew" [*Sepharad* 114].) Motion was his earlier expression of his escape—the boat to Spain, then his high-speed ride in the new car. That flight failed. Now motion, the journey by train, again invites escape from his prison house, through self-reinvention, not by external trappings but by the word. He ends it by inaction, by his assumption that all is a fiction. He will then insert himself into Baudelaire's poetic text, becoming the poetic speaker, appropriating that speaker's loss as his own. That poem moves around an axis of joined opposites: aperture and closure, life and death. Isaac takes on the closure, while extratextually, outside the Baudelarian text and integrally to the Muñoz Molina one, the tension between the poles is left intact. Might the young woman have sensed more than he knew? Their knees did, after all, touch and were pressed together by a lurch in the train. Was she perhaps more capable than he of seeing beyond physical limitations? Might she have carried her own burden of a different order, been engaged in her own flight, devised her own cover?

Isaac's self-reinvention on the train replicates his own earlier one, as a student in Spain, where he could almost be what he longed to become. "...[P]odía dejarse llevar hacia una existencia más o menos idéntica a la de los demás, sus compatriotas, sus compañeros de curso, los amigos que no le preguntaban a uno por su origen..." (*Sefarad* 157). ("...[Y]ou could let yourself be borne off to a life more or less like that other people lived, his compatriots, classmates, and the friends who never asked about his past... [*Sepharad* 103].) Yet their not asking about what might be more faithfully rendered here as his origins is not quite the same as his being one of them, which, with his Spanish passport, he both is and is not. One is reminded of Isaac's assessment of his father's reinvention of self as "algo que tampoco era" (167), something that he was not, either. The beautiful young woman on the train becomes a metaphor for the Spain of ancestral and personal longing even as what he possessed and lost there moves in confluence with the love he may have met and lost on the train. The dual metaphorical movement is circular, like the family's own diaspora, like the boat carrying passengers between Tangiers and Algeciras, the sound of whose horn echoes Isaac's exaltation at his initial escape to Spain, sounding again in the distance, a reminder of defeat, as Isaac and the primary narrator talk amid the disarray of the Ateneo office.

Both metaphors are laden with ambiguity. The ancestral love for Spain is a bitter one, though no less intense and abiding for it; it is the *amor amargo*, though at a diasporic distance, that has expressed itself through centuries of Spanish literature and culture. Whereas the family's, and Sephardim's, expulsions were engendered from without, Isaac's own losses—of Spain and of his potential love—came out of choices of his own. With the years, Isaac had come to see the car accident as "...consecuencia y castigo de su propia soberbia, de la culpable desmesura que le había empujado a avergonzarse de su padre y a renegar de él en lo más hondo de su corazón" (*Sefarad* 169) ("...a consequence and punishment for his own pride, for the self-indulgence that had pushed him to be ashamed of his father and to reject him in his deepest heart" [*Sepharad* 111-112]). As for the young woman, Isaac, to whom she had given her Casablanca address, elected, through permanent inaction, to resolve ambiguity into loss.

There may be in Muñoz Molina's choice of this site a parodic echo of the canonical film of sacrificed love bearing that city's name as its title. The 1942 film "Casablanca" stands at an ironic distance from the conventions of the representation of classic lost love, as it does from those of the "bad boy" / angelic woman romance. Rick is hardly a hero for "giving up" another man's wife, and the wife of a hero of the Resistance at that. Nor is Ilsa the virtuous wartime wife, willing as she is to choose Rick over Victor Laszlo, desirous even of doing so. In the

film, a beautiful woman and her husband board a plane in Casablanca. In the Isaac Salama story inserted into the Muñoz Molina one, a lovely young woman disembarks from a train in Casablanca. Both the film's Rick and the literary text's Isaac Salama choose loss, one in promotion of a cause beyond himself—victory over fascism—, the other out of fear of repudiation in a woman's eyes. The film, then, exercises parody, and perhaps self-parody, while the Muñoz Molina text may parody the film.

The term parody is employed here in the sense in which Linda Hutcheon develops it in *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (1985). As Hutcheon posits parody, it need not imply ridicule or diminishment, a reductionist reflection of one text in another. Rather, Hutcheon goes to the second etymological sense of the ancient Greek prefix *para-*, not as "counter" or "against" but as "beside," with *odos* as "song" (Hutcheon 32). Parody is, then, a kind of dialogue between equals, with one text incorporated into another. The author encodes; the knowledgeable reader decodes. Parody is a bi-textual process, a "repetition with difference" (32). It involves a dual act, the motor for which is normally irony, creator of distance. "The structural identity of the text as a parody depends, then, on the coincidence, at the level of strategy, of decoding (recognition and interpretation) and encoding (34).

A parodic exercise, a repetition with difference, is clearly suggested in Muñoz Molina's evocation through his character Isaac Salama of the Baudelaire sonnet "À une passante." He has Salama recite the sonnet—quite literally a song, as in the etymological root of parody— though the reader "hears" only the last line: "O toi que j'eusse aimé [sic]² O toi qui le savais!" (Muñoz Molina 176). In the Baudelaire poem, in classic Petrarchan form, the two quatrains set forth the situation, to which the two tercets respond. A noisy street surrounded the poetic speaker. A woman passed, deep in mourning, exhibiting a "douleur majestueuse" (Baudelaire 92). She was "agile et noble" (92), her eyes promising both sweetness and pleasure. The woman in Salama's train story, on the other hand, is vibrant, talkative, in the full plenitude of her enthusiastic youth. In the first tercet of the Baudelarian sonnet, the poetic speaker has felt himself reborn. Yet the renewal is bracketed, enclosed, by its denial; in line one of this tercet, "Un éclair...puis la nuit," a flash, a glow—in Geoffrey Wagner's rendering, "a gleam" (Baudelaire trans. Wagner 83), then the night, and the beauty is fleeting, "fugitive" (Baudelaire 93). The correspondence with the Salama train story is here quite close, though the hint of death in Baudelaire's Romantic coupling of partaking and perishing, as in his image of "le plaisir qui tue" (92), is

²The Baudelaire text, in the edition of complete works consulted and cited below, reads "aimée."

absent from the Salama tale. The third line of the tercet is a question: "Ne te verai-je plus que dans l'éternité?" (93), the last component of which does not form part of Salama's sense of the matter. The second tercet, after lamenting distance ("loin"), and a perhaps permanent removal in time ("trop tard," "jamais" [93]), posits a mutual impossibility of re-encounter: "Car j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais" (93). Salama's options were greater; the young woman had given him her address, that of the family home and thus presumably permanent, while he had scribbled for her a false address in Tangiers. He could have found her, though she with far less likelihood him. Salama, unlike Baudelaire's poetic speaker, had to choose again and again his loss. The second half of the Baudelarian line, "tu ne sais où je vais," you do not know where I am going, does find its parallel in Salama, though the first half, "Car j'ignore où tu fuis," I do not know where you flee to, could not be his words. Though she disembarks while he remains on the train, it is he who flees. In the concluding sentence of his story, Muñoz Molina introduces a final element of parodic distance from the Baudelaire text:

Oh tú a quien yo hubiera amado, recitó el señor Isaac Salama aquella tarde en su despacho del Ateneo Español, con la misma grave pesadumbre con que habrá dicho los versículos del kaddish en memoria de su padre, mientras llegaba por la ventana abierta el sonido de la sirena de un barco y la salmodia de un muecín, oh tú que lo sabías. (*Sefarad* 184)

Oh you, whom I would have loved, [señor Isaac Salama] recited that evening in his office in the Ateneo Español, moved as deeply as if he were chanting the Kaddish in his father's memory, [while] the sound of a ship's horn and the music of a muezzin's call came through the open window. *Oh you, who knew so well*. (*Sepharad* 122)³

"[O]h tú que lo sabías." Both the direct object and the verb resonate beyond Baudelaire. The "lo" or "it" suggests not only Salama's attraction to the young woman but also his disability, of which she was possibly, even likely, aware, and, too, his own inability to act before he lost her. "Pero en el fondo sabe, y no ha dejado de saberlo ni un solo instante, que no se atreverá" (*Sefarad* 183) ("But deep down he knows and has never doubted for an instant that he won't do that" [*Sepharad* 121]⁴). The "tú", "you," of the "sabías," "knew," can be both the young woman and Salama himself.

³Muñoz Molina's "con la misma grave pesadumbre" might well be rendered as "with the same grave sorrow" or "with the same heavy grief."

⁴I would render this sentence as, "But deep down he knows, and he has known it every instant since, that he won't be brave enough to do it."

Muñoz Molina chose for the narrative segment that is "Oh tú que lo sabías" / "Oh You, Who Knew So Well" a form of empathic narration in which free indirect style alternates, often within the same paragraph, with first-person narration, primary narrator becoming narrataire. He creates an affective convergence of his two narrators that lends immediacy and intimacy to his tale. Other devices utilized by Muñoz Molina effect distancing. The parodic functions are joined by the narratorial generation of distance through disqualification of an anonymous speaker's mockery of Salama, both discussed above, and by use of the *Ubi sunt* device. Muñoz Molina has his primary narrator, ask "¿Qué habrá sido de..?", "What can have become of...?", both with respect to the guide who had shown Isaac Salama the site of the small extermination camp where his mother and sisters had died and in reference to Isaac Salama himself (*Sefarad* 145, 150). The stratagem serves to establish both temporal and emotional distance, combatting any possible easy sentimentality.

The senses of intimacy and removal effected in Muñoz Molina's text are the proximity to, and the distance from, Salama's land of inherited memory, his crafted life of freedom as a Spaniard among Spaniards, his Hungarian upbringing, the withered hope on the train. And they are the arresting of both Salamás, father and son, at a point of perpetuated loss. In both men, stasis is paradoxically joined to diaspora, with stasis as entrapment and diaspora as the experience and the textual rendering of loss. Both Salamás have rewritten themselves as multiple texts, becoming what they were not and unable to escape what they were. Stasis and diaspora meet for both men in memory, which both offers continuity and imposes fragmentation. These are the two sides of the insistence of memory: the severing that marked the onset of memorial torment and the unbroken perpetuation of that memory's resonant evocation. Memory offers what they cannot reach and imposes what they cannot escape. For both of these children of banishment, Hungarian Sephardim of linear and circular ancestral traditions and personal journeys, memory is perhaps the only terrain that is truly home.

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