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REVIEWS

Don Miguel Asín Palacios. Mística cristiana y mística musulmana.

By José Valdivia Válor. Madrid: Hiperión, 1992. 213 pages.

Tres estudios sobre pensamiento y mística hispanomusulmanes. By

Miguel Asín Palacios. Madrid: Hiperión. 1992. 334 pages.

Islam in Spanish Literature From the Middle Ages to the Present. By

Luce López Baralt, Trans. Andrew Hurley. Leiden: Brill and the Editorial de la U de Puerto Rico, 1992. 323 pages.

Picture this: a stunning book-cover photograph of Don Miguel Asín Palacios, the most controversial and influential Spanish Arabist of the 20th century, one would guess in his forties, garbed in his full-length priestly garb, the simple black with the white collar, and he is being held, more than menacingly, with hands obviously tied behind his back, by three men in full Arab regalia. Two of them have unsheathed their frightening full-length sabers while the third holds the priest steady from behind. The group is out in a scruffy desert somewhere and it is impossible to assume anything other than that this is some sort of crazy missionary priest about to be executed—indeed, one of the amazing details of the photograph is that the priest, Asín, with a look somewhere between terror and otherworldliness—has his eyes turned heavenward, knowing it is the moment to make peace with his maker and prepare for his martyrdom. Indeed, the look alone marks the picture iconographically as part of the tradition of martyred saints paintings. What remarkable story can possibly lie behind so provocative a picture of Don Miguel Asín Palacios, who in fact died not martyred in the deserts of North Africa at the hands of crazed Muslims enraged by his mystical beliefs in the need to reconcile Islam and Christianity, but rather in relative peace, at the age of 72, while summering in San Sebastián in 1943?

In this “vida y obras,” José Valdivia’s *Don Miguel Asín Palacios. Mística*

cristiana y mística musulmana, you will search long but fruitlessly for any explanation of this extraordinary photograph—Don Miguel as Catholic martyr at the hands of his favorite subjects, the Muslims!—and what it could possibly depict (let alone why it is chosen to “symbolize” the subject matter of the book): I finally found a list of the “ilustraciones” on page 179, that serves as “explanations” for all the plates, including that on the cover, which is simply labeled, amazingly “Fotografía de Asín Palacios por J. Ribera.” J. Ribera, of course, has to be none other than Asín’s own great teacher, that other great luminary of Spanish Arabism, Julián Ribera y Tarrago, but this clarifies nothing (except, perhaps, to confirm the obvious, that the Asín in the picture is still relatively young.) My own wild guess—the picture does not lend itself to many straightforward explanations, especially when one knows it was taken by Ribera and that it is thus unlikely it was a real execution scene from which Don Miguel somehow managed to miraculously escape—is that with some sense of dramatic playfulness the two great Arabists had decided to “recreate” a vision of the martyred Ramón Llull, a favorite poet and theologian of both of theirs, especially of Asín’s, who was drawn to Llull for the same reasons he was drawn to the other great heterodox Spanish mystic, Ibn ‘Arabi. Like Ibn ‘Arabi, the great Sufi Muslim, Ramón Llull is a stunning emblem of Asín’s interests, seeing devout and even saintly Catholicism as entirely commensurate with the lifelong dedication to the study of Islam and the attempt to see the one’s (Christianity) indebtedness to the other (Islam)—and Valdivia, in a rare moment of quasi-poetic perceptiveness names Ibn ‘Arabi, something of a mirror image, as one of Asín’s “scholarly” ancestors. But this guess is, in the end, unsatisfactory, not because it is hard to imagine the two great luminaries of Spanish letters doing something so eccentric but rather because the (probably apocryphal) story is that Llull was stoned to death somewhere in North Africa by a group of simple desert Muslims enraged by Llull’s (to them) incomprehensible preachings about the reconciliation of the two faiths.

This frustrating discrepancy between riveting subject matter—here the question-begging photograph—and virtually complete lack of explanation (let alone analysis or exploration of the remarkable and even uncanny) is, unfortunately, fully characteristic of Valdivia’s book, which one perceives soon enough was likely a rather straightforward thesis that was published with very little significant revisions. The subject matter could not be more interesting or provocative since no Spanish Arabist—one might argue no Arabist of any sort until Edward Said (not, properly speaking, an Arabist at all)—has ever caused as much controversy or created so far-reaching a “school” of revisionist thought on the “Arab question” as Asín. But the book, which is an overwhelmingly uncritical series of graduate-studentish resumes of his many works and “reactions” to them (preceded by about 50 stinting pages of the “life”—although here too the life

has scarcely any details beyond what one would construct from a *curriculum vitae*) shows little interest in addressing what seem to me to be all the interesting questions.

How did he come to be so intensely interested in Arabic in the Spain of the late 19th century? (We are told only that he met Ribera and that was that.) How and where and when did he go through the immensely difficult process of “simply”—there is no such thing—learning Arabic? (At the beginning of one paragraph he has met Ribera and become his student—by the end of the same paragraph he is a full-blown Arabist.) How did his intense and lifelong interest in Muslim mysticism in general and in the possibility of “reconciliations” between this and Christian spirituality work within his own life as an ordained and practicing priest—indeed, what do we do with the fact that he began his studies as an Arabist and to those to prepare for the priesthood at exactly the same moment—all this, moreover, in a Spain whose Catholicism was, to put it mildly, not predisposed to seeing Islam as its closest religious relative? (Again, a sentence saying simply there was no contradiction between the two is all that we are told—but the point, of course, is that to come to such a conclusion involved, at a minimum, two immensely problematic turns: one, a highly heterodox bent of Christian-mind and two, a supremely nuanced reading of the mystics themselves). Finally—skipping over dozens of other tantalizing questions, including that concerning what must have been intense nervous breakdowns repeatedly in his life, referred to in ever so delicate 19th-century terms as his “neurastenia”—how did he deal with the often extremely damning controversy and criticism provoked by his masterpiece, *La escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia*? (First published in 1919, this generated widespread controversy and interest and it is telling that although Valdivia notes very generally that it was widely translated—and into English in 1926—he does not bother to point out that it was conspicuously *never* translated into Italian. This remarkable situation was finally altered last year, with a translation into Italian by the same press that had, the previous year, published the fundamental primary text linking Dante to Islamic visions of the underworld and the ascent to God, the so-called *Libro della Scala*, and then with enormous fanfare and conscience examining and—still—controversy, all in the popular, not just scholarly, press.) In sum, what is that picture on the cover all about?

It is unfortunate indeed that this first full-fledged study ever of Asín should provide no more answers than the “picture taken by J. Ribera” variety, and it is too bad particularly since this is a book conspicuously put out as part of an ambitious program by libros Hiperión, which has obviously undertaken to become the house publisher for the works not only of Asín himself (and the *Tres estudios* under review here is but one of the to date five Asín titles in their expanding list, including, crucially, the volume on Islam and the *Divine Comedy*) but also for the whole range

of a broadly defined—and immensely important—*escuela*. Among the latter, it is important to note—especially since the whole issue of publication and reception of such works in Spain has always been problematic and telling, and this publishing house has clearly chosen to adopt the mantle of Spain's controversial "Arabist" press—that the Hiperión list now includes excellent Spanish translations of such classics of Hispano-Arabic scholarship as Henri Pérès' *Esplendor de al-Andalus* and Adolf von Schack's *Poesía y arte de los árabes en España y Sicilia*.

Hiperión, moreover, was the original (1985) Spanish publisher for Luce López Baralt's *Huellas del Islam en la literatura española. De Juan Ruiz a Juan Goytisolo*, the Brill translation of which has recently appeared. Since I reviewed the Spanish original in some detail (*HR 55* (1987): 377–380) I will note only briefly here that the pleasure of seeing an English translation of López Baralt's invaluable study is somewhat mitigated by the relative inaccessibility of all Brill volumes. It is, simply, far too expensive to be the sort of book picked up by the more or less casual reader—and Brill, in any case, seems to market itself only to the very specialized Orientalist market. This is more than a petty quibble on my part since this is in many ways an exemplary work on the "traces" (*huellas*) of Islam in Spanish literature—and very much among the worthiest of the *escuela* of Asín Palacios—and it should have far greater exposure than it seemed destined to have in Spanish. Indeed, as I detail in that review of the first Spanish edition, the interest and subtlety of her arguments are precisely that she understands that the traditional terms of "influence" are clearly inadequate in this realm and that, in some crucial respects, the most profound and indeed interesting traces are those that are post-expulsion, in one way or another heavily veiled, preeminently the imagery of the Spanish mystics of the Siglo de Oro, whose access to Arabic poetic texts is undoubtedly through their own influence on the Andalusian Jewish *kabbalah*.

This is, in the end, exactly what Asín Palacios is all about: the real subtlety of the often banalized concept of "influence"—and in Spain, in particular, the way the mystics so often served, so counterintuitively, as a fulcrum for the complex relations among the three religions. And if the Valdivia "biography" is disappointing, the real thing, Asín's work, is quite the opposite, and in this volume the *tres estudios* reprinted are all not only of intrinsic interest to the specialist—which means the Arabist, in these cases—but also, as with his infamous book that made Catholics and Dante-readers all over the world reel back in surprise—they are of powerful archival significance, particularly so for any history of Spanish intellectual life in the 20th century: one is an Academy inauguration speech; a second is the central article for the founding issue of the journal *Al-Andalus*. Perhaps, in the end, the best and real explanations for that astonishing photograph of Asín playing the Catholic martyr threatened, but never executed, by the Muslims, can only lie in

these reprinted works of his on a whole range of Muslim mystics and their ties to Catholic mystics such as San Juan de la Cruz—and thus, in his profoundly Catholic belief in their ultimate communion, both historic and transcendental.

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La décima popular en la tradición hispánica. Actas del Simposio Internacional sobre La Décima (Las Palmas, del 17 al 22 de diciembre de 1992) Ed. Maximiano Trapero, con la colaboración de Dan Munteanu y M^a Teresa Cáceres Lorenzo. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: U de las Palmas de Gran Canaria & Cabildo Insular de Gran Canaria, 1994. 412 páginas.

La enorme importancia de la literatura oral y popular en el ámbito de la literatura hispánica es un hecho reconocido desde la antigüedad. Sin embargo, no todos sus géneros y modos de manifestación han sido estudiados con la misma intensidad. Ha sido, sobre todo el Romancero el género privilegiado, en detrimento de la lírica, del refranero o de la poesía improvisada. El libro que reseñamos viene, precisamente, a reducir este desequilibrio, al atender a un género preterido en la atención de los estudiosos como el de la décima popular.

La décima popular en la tradición hispánica recoge los resultados científicos del simposio internacional celebrado en Las Palmas de Gran Canaria en 1992. Ciertamente, este simposio tuvo un carácter singular en cuanto no se limitó a ser un simple encuentro de estudiosos. Como afirma el director del simposio, Maximiano Trapero, este fue a la vez “un *Simposio* de estudiosos de la décima y un *Festival* de decimistas,” con lo que ello implica de gozoso y fructífero encuentro entre la Universidad y la cultura popular, tradicionalmente alejadas entre sí, pero, además, reuniendo en el evento no sólo a los investigadores y a los cantores populares, sino a filólogos y a musicólogos, ya que, no se debe olvidar, que estamos ante una poesía cantada y no meramente escrita o recitada.

Aunque el libro recoge el ambiente del simposio en tanto reproduce las intervenciones en verso de la Presidencia y de algunos congresistas, además de fotografías y otros documentos, lo fundamental es, por supuesto, el cuerpo científico, constituido por la conferencia inaugural de Armistead, titulada “La poesía oral improvisada en la tradición hispánica,” más las cinco ponencias y catorce comunicaciones.

Si Armistead ofrece una panorámica general, las ponencias y co-