

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE OTHER GOLDEN AGE: MORE SIGHS

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*My heart is in the East and I am at the edge of the West.
How can I savor what I eat, how find it sweet?*

*How can I fulfill my vows and pledges while
Zion is in Christendom's fetter, and I am in Islam's shackle?*

*It would be easy for me to leave behind all the opulence of Spain;
It would be glorious to see the dust of the ruined Shrine!*

(Judah Halevi)

Surely, there can be few cases more remarkable in a historical contemplation of the issues of "identity politics" than that of Spain's first "Golden Age".¹ And, surely, few cases of central literary-cultural problems in our field illustrate so vividly why (and how) the historical entity we define as our own, medieval Spain, ought to be central in public discussions of many of the most compelling political, cultural, and literary issues of the latter half of the twentieth century. While for most Hispanists that expression may at first suggest an approximate translation of the "Siglo de Oro", it is also the moniker used by Hebraists to refer to that period in "Spain" –Sefarad– from roughly the end of the tenth century to roughly the middle of the twelfth century, that represents the heights of achievement in Jewish cultural and literary history.

So remarkable and unambiguous is the innovation and achievement of the era that there are but two other historical moments in this history that can rival its ascendance and perceived glory: the prelapsarian (and pre-exilic) Solomonic age, with its apogee in the poetry of David, an undisputed part now of our communal "Western" literary canon and

¹ This essay continues and hopefully complements my essay of a year ago on "An Andalusianist's Last Sigh" on Miguel Asín Palacios, *La corónica* 24.2 (Spring, 1996): 179-89.

heritage; and the present age and its vibrant new literature, this latter powerfully conditioned by the historically momentous re-establishment of Hebrew as a maternal tongue in the state of Israel. Between the two lies the lush garden, the idyll, of Sefarad, with its golden apples and its seemingly unruffled songbirds, and it is an indispensable point of reference for the other two periods, the nostalgic vortex that first recovers and revitalizes the near-mythic past into post-exilic history.

In many ways, it is all summed up in the verses of the iconic Judah Halevi, quoted above: Golden Spain miraculously gives the Jewish poet the ability to sing, at long last, like the revered ancestor David. But this homeland too will have to be abandoned; it seems it will once again come down to painful, sacrificial exile. Sefarad is the windy and painful site where just offshore the sea winds blow one both to the East and to the West.² This is the place where Jewish poets remember how to sing as David did, not just piously, but also hungrily of human longings, and not just in the ritualized and foreign tongue of a long-formalized liturgy but in the newly familiar and passionate accents of a living language.

Finally, it is Spain itself, and the remarkably powerful Jewish identity it has allowed, that make possible the paradoxical ambition to leave Spain, to seek an exile whose pain is scarcely disguised by the bravado of the "It would be easy...". The desire for Zion is in the end a very Spanish thing, the climax of the Golden Age of Sefarad, Halevi's most scandalous invention. For at the heart of this first enunciation of what will be a historically overwhelming object of desire lies a paradox only those very few who know all the languages of medieval Spain can hear, literally: Halevi's Hebrew poetry, like all the secular poetry of the Jewish Golden Age, is powerfully Arabized. In its timbre and diction, and most of all in the ideology of language and poetry that makes it possible, it

² The East-West opposition is originally a motif in Arabic poetry, within which its primary resonances, especially from the perspective of al-Andalus, include the complex relations between the cultural "homeland" and its "outpost" in the (barbaric) West, as well as the longing for the site of religious and spiritual fulfillment, to be fulfilled in the required Muslim *hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca. The absorption of the motif in Andalusian Hebrew poetry includes, as Brann points out in his forthcoming portrait of Judah Halevi, a further resonance for the Jewish poets, for whom the "east" also means Christian Spain and "west" is Muslim Spain, understanding furthermore that the Jews of Christian Spain were unambiguously regarded as the poor cousins. These latter inhabited a place (this other echo of "east") that lay outside the divinely favored paradise that was Islamic Spain. Halevi himself, incidentally, was born in that "east", or at least on its cusp, in or near Tudela (a Muslim frontier town, but not for long) at the probable time of his birth *circa* 1075, but he emigrated to al-Andalus as a young man and became one of the ultimate representatives of the "western" Arabized Jewish elite.

cannot be understood as anything other than Andalusian. This is a phenomenon unique to Spain, even though the Jews lived and in many comparable ways flourished in virtually every other part of the Islamic universe. But this poetry, this remaking of language as the most complex and ambiguous marker of identity, is the embodiment of the "opulence of Spain", as Halevi calls it. What that means, if we can be reductive for a few minutes, is the richness that comes from the abandonment, whether chosen or imposed, of an ideal of cultural purity and singularity of identity.



While Jewish historians and scholars of Hebrew literature have, perforce, long recognized (and often struggled with) the considerable complication that it is in al-Andalus, under Islamic rule and Arabic cultural domination and because of the impact of Arabic models, that this other "Siglo de Oro" comes to be, most of their discussions have taken place largely out of our earshot. Until recently even those of us explicitly interested in the question of the mixed cultural identity of medieval Spain have had limited materials readily available on this Golden Age. But in the last decade copious windows have finally opened up to us onto that golden land, as the Jews at the time themselves saw it, meaning both that a significant selection of the poetry itself is now available in aesthetically satisfying English verse translation and that there are now quite accessible studies of that poetry focused on the pivotal question of cultural identity (and "ambiguity", as one of the books' titles makes explicit). The purpose of this article is to bring some of these materials to the attention of the readership of *La corónica*—and, of course, to suggest why they are essential reading for all students, all readers, of medieval Spain.

One of the results of this small explosion of studies on Golden Age Sefardic poetry by a small but brilliant coterie of scholars is that there is enough material available for the rest of us to absorb the outlines of a great story, largely unknown despite being the prelude to the story inescapably played out on the world's center stage in the last half of the twentieth century. Like all good stories, perhaps, it is marked equally by pleasure and triumph, on the one hand, and poignancy and loss on the other. And mostly both at once. Beginning in the middle of the tenth century the Jewish community living in al-Andalus invented and vigorously pursued a cultural role that was predicated both on the relatively benign political and social attitudes of the ruling Muslim community, and on the Jews' own self-confident attraction to salient features of the flourishing Arabic culture of the moment. As Raymond Scheindlin

summarizes it in the introduction to the first of his two collections of annotated translations:

What was unique about the Andalusian Jewish courtiers was the self-conscious way in which they synthesized the dominant Arabic-Islamic culture with Jewish religious and literary traditions. These men, who founded a new type of Jewish life, based on a novel educational program and geared to producing new leadership, sought literary expression in a completely renovated poetry. For these Jews, religious commitment, cultural identification, and national loyalty were strong enough and flexible enough to permit them to enter openly into the life and style of the dominant culture while remaining Jews. The Andalusian Muslim ruling class of the time was sufficiently worldly and tolerant in its religious outlook to welcome them as participants; the price was acculturation, but not conversion. (*Wine, Women, and Death* 4)

It must be added here, as a small but delightful detour, that the same Arabic-Islamic culture of the place and the moment was one which, extraordinarily, had also indulged in a bit of revolutionary assimilation, since this is, of course, the moment at which the *muwashshah*, (or the *zajal*) with its own expressions of cultural ambiguity, is created and flourishes. This is a multi-layered story of strong egos and resulting cultural assimilations: while the Jews are learning from a powerfully Arabocentric culture the ways in which they can refashion their own language and poetry as an expression of a complex identity rooted in their ancestral language, Hebrew, Arabic poetry is sufficiently self-assured to accommodate foreigners into its own house, to allow the Romance voice, and a female-marked voice at that, into the historically closed clan of poetic champions. From this perspective, Stern's historic deciphering of the mozarabic *kharjas* embedded in Hebrew *muwashshahāt* is a revelation of not one but rather two distinct cultural and poetic revolutions: the creative assimilation of Romance forms into Arabic poetics, on the one hand, and the creation of a secular Hebrew poetic tradition, based on a self-assured imitation of Arabic poetic ideology, on the other.

This assimilation of the dominant—and in many ways domineering—Arabocentric ethos, was both thorough and, unexpectedly, original. What the Andalusian Jews did was to so thoroughly absorb the Arabic principle of the superiority of one language, Arabic, with its vaunted incomparability in the realm of the poetry of the human condition, that the spectacularly life-affirming principle became their own. It is by

believing in, and unembarrassedly imitating, the essential revelation and truth of that ultimately Arabic principle, that Hebrew is brought out of its liturgical entombment and into a land of living poetry. One of the many interesting things about the poetic revolution that took place, the transformation of Hebrew into the language of a secular poetry, is that this happened in the midst of a full-blown process of Arabization within the Spanish Jewish community, among those lucky enough, by their own lights, to have lived in the "west", in Arabic-speaking lands. The process is succinctly described by Ross Brann as follows:

Jewish communities from the Iberian peninsula to the Iranian plateau came to employ a distinctive form of Arabic as their spoken language and as the linguistic medium for most of their written transactions and literary compositions. Judeo-Arabic, as this language is known, differed from the Middle Arabic employed by Christians and Muslims in two important respects: it was normally written in Hebrew characters, and Hebrew words are interspersed throughout its otherwise Arabic texts. The linguistic transformation of the Jews was so pervasive that even manifestly religious literature such as biblical and talmudic commentaries, theological treatises, legal documents from rabbinical courts, and rabbinic responsa were written in Judeo-Arabic. (Brann 6)

The Hebrew poets, as well as their audiences, of course knew the Arabic poetic tradition as intimately as any educated Muslim, and moreover, as Brann's description suggests, Arabic was more often than not the maternal tongue. What this might have led to, more predictably and simply, could well have been the Jewish poets writing poetry in Arabic. Given their esteem of Arabic as the language of high culture and learning *par excellence*, and given that it was, as has just been pointed out, used for virtually everything else, including religious purposes, the surprise is precisely that the Andalusian Jews did *not* use this revered native tongue but turned instead to Hebrew, which had not been used to write love poetry, for all intents and purposes, since David. What took place was not Arabization in the simpler sense but rather in the far more complex process that was the full reconceptualization of Hebrew poetry so that it internalized the principles of Arabic poetry. Everything is transferred and made over, made new in the full Poundian sense of the expression: from the foundational proposition that Hebrew is capable (as Arabic is) of being both a sacred and a secular language and the resulting fusion of secular and sacred languages, to the full range of

themes and allusions. Among these, most arrestingly and controversially, we find the transfer of the Islamic notion of the pilgrimage to the foundational temple, the desire to see Jerusalem as Halevi would first write of it, the invention of Zionism. Finally, most tellingly, or at least most audibly, these songs sound unmistakably of the rhythms and accents of Arabic as it works in verse.

As all the scholars whose work is under review here note, in their different ways, the adaptation of all of these aspects of a powerful Arabic poetic culture to Jewish life and Hebrew poetry paradoxically reveals not a weak sense of identity but, very much to the contrary, immense self-assurance. At least one moral to take with us from this universe into today's often tedious identity discussions is that the strongest and most self-assured cultural egos will beg, steal, and borrow promiscuously and shamelessly.

But that, of course, is not the end of the story, although I think even if it were it would be more than interesting enough. It would turn out, perhaps inevitably enough, to also be the case that the incomparably successful and powerful Jewish identity that emerged from this process of internal acculturation was not without its own conflicts for some members of the Jewish community. This is most conspicuously true for Judah Halevi himself, who would spend his last years recanting, trying to get to the East from the West, struggling with the incredible paradoxes and internal conflicts his own success as the unrivaled master of the new Hebrew secular poetry created in him. The lovely "My heart is in the East and I am in the West", one can eventually see, is bristling with painful paradoxes, since, of course, it will not be easy at all to leave the opulence of Spain, either literally or, more importantly, metaphorically, in his language. Part of what has come with "Islam's shackle", as Judah Halevi knows better than anyone else, is the very language that, in every sense, makes that very poem possible.

Out of this brilliant Spanishness, this Andalusianess, Halevi had forged the most spectacular and successful secular poetry in Hebrew since the first Golden Age. In doing so he and his cohorts, the other "courtier-rabbis", had recovered the Solomonic past by making it new and a past from which the Jews were not condemned to be perpetually cut off and truly exiled. This reclamation had set the stage for the ultimate fulfillment of this vast Andalusian promise: to be able to sing like David again, but somehow to have that be as "pure", in its place, in its language, in its Jewishness, as the opulence of Spain was impure. The almost unbearable paradoxes of such longings, the ways in which, like passionate love poetry, the fulfillment of the promise is understood to be the eventual doom of the poetic and spiritual desire that has made

it possible, all of these very human torments would not escape Halevi. And no one, least of all Halevi, would have wanted to imagine just how long history would defer the next moment at which the Jews, exiled from Sefarad, would again be able to take up Hebrew as the language of their secular literature, this time in the Zion Halevi had crafted as the ultimate object of desire.

Or, come to think of it, perhaps it is Halevi who knew best of all how difficult, how painful, how expensive, it could and would be, and in the end how completely impure, just as Solomon's love songs are compellingly impure. But Halevi was himself seduced in all of this, and he does leave the land that has given all of this, made it possible, composing numerous "sea songs" that lay bare the trepidations about the trip and the possibility of fulfillment, and although he does indeed set out on his pilgrimage for that Holy Land, it is far from easy in so many ways. He claims that to do this he will go back to being a good Jew, a "pure" Jew, and give it all up, give up the love poetry, the unmistakable rhythms and accents of Arabic in those songs, the applause of adoring audiences when he writes and sings such songs. He proclaims, too long, too loudly, too often, in too vivid detail, how little he cares about everything he has given up, or will give up, to achieve this. Does he make it? Can one make it? Can Jerusalem be reached without the language that Spain, uniquely Spain, gave us? I leave you, for the rest of this story—and of many other stories—to some of the masterly studies at hand.



Dan Pagis, who died tragically young in 1986, is the scholar-muse of a generation (small as it is) of students of the poetry of Sefarad. Like many other Israelis of his generation, Hebrew was far from being his first language: he was a German-speaking assimilated Jew who survived Nazi camps and emigrated in 1947. He arrived at the poetry of the Golden Age as a successful poet in the Hebrew he had learned as an adult, and although he was trained as a scholar his own work would stand out in contrast to the intensely philological and historical work of his predecessors for its intense sensitivity to the poetry itself, and to the special texture of the poetry of men who, like himself and the other Israeli poets of the post-1948 universe, were struggling to reclaim Hebrew as a living language and forge a poetry of a decidedly ambiguous identity.

Unfortunately, the bulk of his work (including two major books on Golden Age poetry) has never been translated, but not long before his death he delivered the prestigious Taubman lectures at Berkeley and the slim volume (some 70 pages of text) at hand is the text of those

three lectures, published posthumously: "Individuality and the Poetic *Traditio*"; "Play and Substance: Aspects of Hebrew-Spanish Imagery"; and "Convention and Experience: Hebrew Love Poetry in Spain and Italy". Although the eloquent and seductive introduction to the subject these small pieces provide leaves one hungering for a translation of his major works in the area, a perfect introduction they do indeed provide, perhaps far more so than the fuller, scholarly works whose principle audience was Hebraists. These lectures were clearly aimed at the "lay" audience, i.e., the likes of us. In any case, in an evening's delightful read one is well inside this universe of poetic struggles with the variety of traditions that go into the making of the Spanish heirs of David and Solomon.

The two scholars who provide blurbs on the dust-jacket of the Pagis book, Raymond Scheindlin and Ross Brann, are the two Americans who have most carried out his tradition of appreciation of the culturally and poetically complex universe of Jewish Spain, and both are first-rate Arabists as well as Hebraists. Both also know Spanish, and the medieval Spanish universe as we more customarily define it as well, and this knowledge is always in the background although often it is not explicit.

Raymond Scheindlin's two volumes (*Wine, Women and Death* and *The Gazelle*) provide unique anthologies of the poetry. Each one includes a lengthy general introduction, followed by a selection of poems (arranged into three sections in the first volume, two in the second) which include the original Hebrew, a facing-page translation, and a commentary of varying length immediately following each poem. There are also notes that accompany the introduction(s) and the commentaries to the poems, and these will lead the more curious reader to the most fundamental sources (many of them in either Hebrew or Arabic, of course), as well as "For Further Reading" in the first volume which provides a useful overview of works of general interest and utility available for the lay reader. The introduction of the first volume is of particular interest and utility for all of us, as it provides lovely thumbnail sketches not only of the general scene, the cultural conditions of the Jews in medieval Spain, but also of all the principal poets, the latter being presented in little *vidas*, for that is what they very much are, in the tradition of those that form part of the songbooks of Provençal poetry of which these volumes are in their own ways descendants.

Scheindlin is a teacher, a rabbi, in every best sense of the words, and these volumes, free of jargon and clearly written, are centered on translations of the poetry that Scheindlin believes in and clearly loves as poetry. The translator knows how treacherously the poems may reflect any reality—and yet how inescapably they are tied to realities—and they

brilliantly serve their purpose of educating a series of diverse audiences, including ourselves.³ I am happy to acknowledge here that he has been my own teacher and rabbi and that it is he who first told me the stories recounted here and that it has been his translations, some of it in these volumes with a great deal more not yet published, of this remarkable body of poetry that have led to my involvement with this integral part, as I now see it, of medieval Spain. This access to this world, these teachings, are also ready-made in these volumes, there to be passed on to our own students, and they should be on everyone's shelves.

Ross Brann, who was himself a student of Scheindlin's, has written one of the few full-length scholarly works accessible (both linguistically and culturally) on what is, in the end, the most enduringly fascinating theme. *Cultural Ambiguity and Hebrew Poetry in Muslim Spain*, the subtitle of his book, states it more self-evidently than *The Compunctious Poet*, the title proper. This is a book about the power and glory, at times the pain, of the cultural paradoxes of the Golden Age, and about how great poetry both reflects and transcends its historical circumstances. This is a compelling, thorough and complex study that is focused on the trope, within the Hebrew poetry of Islamic Spain, of "compunctiousness". I had to look it up the first time, too: it means, roughly, that renunciation of the traps of secular poetry (or love), usually at the end of the poet's life, in favor of a life (and poetry) that will lead to God, what we often call a palimpsest and find, most famously, in the *Dove's Neck Ring*, in the treatise by Andreas Capellanus, and in the *Vita Nuova*.

But Brann's study is far from narrowly focused and provides excellent discussions and expositions on dozens of related topics, some (such as the introductory historical section) of exemplary economy and nuance. Perfect, in other words, to steal for introductory lectures in graduate courses. The first chapter is on the history and aesthetics of the trope of compunctiousness itself and on its obvious relationship, in al Andalus, to the identity issue presented by Arabic poetry being so transparently at the heart and soul of secular Hebrew poetry. This is followed by chapters whose very titles and subjects seem to me enticing *a priori*: "Andalusian Hebrew Poetry and the Hebrew Bible", "The Regenerate Poet:

³ Scheindlin is also willing to confront, although without the intent to fully clarify what is, perhaps, not fully clarifiable, namely the "identity" issues that emerge from this often wickedly complex poetry, including the especially thorny issue, especially for devout readers within the Hebrew tradition, of the openly homoerotic lyrics written by many otherwise exemplary rabbis. This is a subject that could obviously be central to these identity questions in medieval Spain and its poetries—and it plays a huge role in classical Arabic poetry as well—but it seems to me to deserve a fuller, separate treatment.

Moses Ibn Ezra"⁴, "A Way with Words or Away With Words? Judah Halevi" and, finally, leaving the Golden Age proper and focusing on Jews in Christian Spain, "Echoes and Epigones: Shem Tov Falaquera and Todros Abulafia". Although this book, unlike Scheindlin's, is not a work principally meant to instruct the unlettered but rather to explore these topics in specialized although quite accessible detail, it has a whole universe to offer every Spanish medievalist.



As I was finishing writing this piece (which I confess I began to write a number of years ago but had allowed to fall by the wayside), a new volume appeared in the Princeton University Press Series of poetry in translation ("The Lockert Library"): *Selected Poems of Shmuel HaNagid*, translated by Peter Cole. I will not attempt to provide a review of the volume, which in any case was well reviewed in *The New York Times* and *The New Republic*, where discussions about medieval Spain are not commonplace. But let me say a few words about Samuel the Nagid (933-1056) as he is customarily referred to in English. He led a public and political life that made him the prototype of the successful Spanish Jew during the auric period. Born Shmuel ben Yosef HaLevi, and known as Isma'il ibn Nagrela in Arabic, he is eventually known as "the Nagid", a title that means "governor" of the Jews of al-Andalus, a position he held, as well as being Vizier to the Governor of Granada. Among other remarkable (or so it might seem to us) things about his life, one notes that he not only led Muslim armies into battle for Granada over a period of almost twenty years but also wrote remarkable poetry about these military exploits, triumphs and tragedies.

So, how many of us used to know that the literature of medieval Spain included songs of arms and men, written by a Jew, in Arabic-accented Hebrew, about battles fought by Granadan Muslim armies against other Muslims? What were we saying about identity? Is it only Juan

⁴ On who Ibn Ezra was, let me simply quote from Scheindlin's *vida*: "Moses Ibn Ezra (c. 1055-after 1135) belonged to a family prominent in the court of Granada, and its Jewish community ... [H]e found his world shattered by the fall of the city-states of Andalusia to the Almoravide Berbers in 1090 ... [H]e spent the second half of his life in various cities of northern Spain, lamenting his isolation and the loss of his cultural circle..." (*Wine, Women, and Death* 12). Of the many things of which Ibn Ezra's life and poetry are exemplary is the ubiquitousness of exile in all of the literatures of medieval Spain—from the *Cid* to the writings of Ibn Hazm, and, centrally, in the Hebrew corpus—another subject central to these discussions. What better definition of a complex and layered identity can there be than that provoked by talking of exile.

Goytisolo, or Salman Rushdie, who should be writing in the public press about the lessons (as difficult and ambiguous as they are, if they are good lessons) of medieval Spain for our own historical moment? Shouldn't we, as the official institutional guardians of these medieval Spains, be making sure that the crucial, and often directly analogous or even directly derivative problems of complex religious and cultural identities of the so-called post-modern world are always discussed with explicit reference to the "case" of medieval Spain? Why should we allow the public discourses on the most remarkable of the issues of the day—from the appalling collapse of the "convivencia" of Yugoslavia, to the complexities of the varieties of European Islamic identities, to the blossoming of Palestinian writers, Muslim and Christians alike, who write in Hebrew—to continue to take place without this most obvious of historical references?

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