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Netanyahu, Benjamin. Toward the Inquisition: Essays on Jewish and Converso History in Late Medieval Spain. Pp. xi, 267. ISBN: 0-801-43410-6.

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"A cross word from him scatters the sparrow from the trees Benzion [Netanyahu] is a secular man, and yet his judgments of Israel and history and much else are often so dark, so unforgiving, that he sometimes sounds like the harshest of Old Testament prophets." This, the beginning of a description of Netanyahu pe`re by David Remnick, for a profile of Netanyahu fils in last May's New Yorker. It is a striking sketch meant principally to suggest the effect such a man would have as a father, and yet one is mightily tempted to crib this and other descriptions of the sparrow-scattering effect of Netanyahu's written, scholarly work. A bit later in the piece Remnick gives a good thumbnail sketch of the Inquisition book, at a certain point saying "After fourteen hundred pages, one is led to the darkest conclusion possible . . ." Indeed. And the book of essays at hand, which Netanyahu published two years after his Inquisition book, is no lighter, indeed if anything more depressing to read and contemplate for any sustained period of time. This I offer as the most modest excuse possible for the delay in completing this review of a book received some time ago. [I note, also in the way of feeble exculpation, "you see, other reviews are still appearing," that an immensely instructive review by David Nirenberg of both the Inquisition book of 1995 and of this volume of essays appeared in Madrid just last month, as the lead article in the Revista de libros (28: April, 1999).]

The seven essays that make up this volume were all previously published, from as early as 1976 to as late as 1997, the date of the volume itself, as well, interestingly, as that of the very different Henry Kamen book on the subject. (At the end of this review I list the essays in the order in which they appear in the book, followed by the year of their original publication.) But it would have been easy enough for Cornell University Press to justify this collected republication in the aftermath of the great publicity of the Inquisition volume, and in the context of the continuing familiarity of the Netanyahu name and family, although perhaps after the Israeli elections of last month, the spotlight on the father will diminish along with that on the son. And it is crucial to note here that this explicit context of both family and of contemporary world politics, as well as of the Israeli political scene in particular, is essential in considering the significance of these essays: Netanyahu himself understands this quite correctly, it seems to me that the interpretation of history is complexly rooted in one's personal relationships to aspects of that history, and that political views are in turn informed by one's vision of historical phenomena. And in the Netanyahu case, as the Remnick article makes quite clear, the histories of the family and of the nation--and thus by extension of the Jewish people, at least in the Netanyahu way of seeing things,-are all of a large piece.

For those familiar with the Netanyahu theory of the Inquisition, which at this point has been widely discussed in both academic journals and in the non-academic press, these essays offer nothing new, and at some level might be seen as the obvious "leftovers" from the massive project of writing the big book on the subject. (The "Toward" of the title *Toward the Inquisition*, is self-evidently the "toward" of his own thinking, and "Inquisition" here might actually refer to the title of his own book.) Here, as elsewhere, Netanyahu sees anti-Semitism tout simple as the cause of the tragedies of late medieval and early modern Spain, and this is not the place to rehearse in any detail the complex and varied reactions to that earlier book and to his theory. At some level, then, only those needing more of the same, more exhausting argumentation and documentation than that provided in the nearly-1400 pages of the Random House tome, are likely to want to turn to these essays. On the other hand, for the non-historians in the crowd, and for those who might, for teaching purposes (for example), want in the size and form of a single essay the gist of the Netanyahu view, this might be a useful tome ---the last essay, "The Primary Cause of the Spanish Inquisition," gives an early summary of Netanyahu's broader theory, and others can be read now, especially in light of the broad discussions of the big book, as relatively -- and I emphasize the 'relatively' -- tidy examples of the Netanyahu thesis and method.

But I undertook this review because several of these, including the lead essay, have a focus of special interest for those of us in the realm of literary and cultural studies: the work of the two most influential Spanish scholars on the paradigms of medieval and early modern Spain, Américo Castro and Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz. It is Netanyahu's extraordinary view that despite their well-known and indeed acrimonious and divisive differences ---which might be said to characterize the two poles of attitudes vis-a`-vis inter-confessional relations in medieval Spain, as well as the overall impact that medieval "chapter" had on all subsequent Spanish history ---both historians and their views are more alike than different, and the basis of their likeness is their anti-Semitism. For those of us who have worked long and hard, as students of Américo Castro, to establish both the centrality of Jewish culture to what we call "Spanish" in the medieval period, as well as the singular tragedy and complex repercussions of the Inquisition and the expulsions, these are staggering claims. Claims which are closely argued, taking on word by word and sentence by sentence often miniscule passages of both scholars' enormous bodies of work, and which probably deserve to be refuted, or at least examined, in

a comparable exegetical mode. But this is not the place for such a detailed examination, and, in any case, that would be to follow Netanyahu precisely down the path he wants to go, which I would characterize as further into that very dark woods where, in fact, there are only trees, and perhaps, for that matter, mostly only leaves and small pieces of bark, or the poor, scared-off and scattered sparrows.

If the Inquisition book were not enough to convince one of the bitterness and partisanship out of which Netanyahu writes, and of the sometimes misguided blame that is assigned as a result of the unrelenting nature of that bitterness, then surely it will suffice to read the attack on Américo Castro (almost always referred to affectionately as "Don Américo" by his intellectual descendants) which is very much at the front of this book, and indeed emblematic of its unforgiving tone and spirit. Thus, the root (and the "proofs") of the accusation of anti-Semitism leveled at Don Américo, the scholar who is single-handedly responsible for whatever limited understanding there is among Hispanists of the fundamental and foundational role played by Jews and Muslims, and their languages and cultures, in the history of Spain, is in effect that by attributing characteristics to the "Spaniards" that are originally to be found in the Jewish community, he was essentializing and maligning Judaism. Of course, as Nirenberg points out in his review, Netanyahu ends up maintaining that all general statements about Jews and Judaism are anti-Semitic essentializing, all the while constructing an elaborate essentializing description of anti-Semitism, a description that at times, disturbingly, seems to include, a priori, all those who are not Jews. And who is and is not "Jewish" ---talking about the history of fifteenth-century Spain, no less -- is in fact one of the principal areas of high-handed pronouncements and of accusations of anti-Semitism.

Indeed, one of Netanyahu's most remarkable and puzzling arguments is that all Jewish conversions, all conversos, were not only "genuine" (despite their being provoked by the virulent anti-Semitism by which they were surrounded) but so thorough -- and Judaism presumably so un-essential, and so thinly cultural -- that any and all suppositions of "Judaizing" are merely signs of racist anti-Semitism. Indeed, the second essay in this book is an extended discussion of the converso or not-converso debate over Alonso de Espina, author of the *Fortalitium Fidei* and notorious advocate of the Inquisition. And it ends up arguing, not so subtly, that no matter the purpose of the question (of whether an individual was a converso or not), no matter whether one was an Inquisitor or whether one is a scholar trying to show the preposterousness of claims of "purity" within a Spanish culture so thoroughly and unconsciously hybrid, that to say that a bad man or a bad thing might have anything to do with Judaism is proof of anti-Semitism. Or that someone's attachment to some sort of cultural practice, when it is so obviously "imperfectly" Jewish, is only going to be described as "Jewish" by an anti-Semite with some sort of malevolent purpose. Part of the analysis here, in fact, is very much at cross-purposes with the work of someone like Américo Castro, since by and large Don Américo dealt with questions of Judaism and Islam and Christianity in Spain (or in "Spain" before 1492, al-Andalus or Sefarad) as manifest in complex linguistic and cultural practices ---something Netanyahu explicitly shuns. Indeed, one can't help but wonder what Netanyahu made of the reports that appeared earlier this year of communities of Christians in the American Southwest who think now they are descendants of Spanish conversos, not knowing for the last three or four hundred years why, for example, they ritually lit candles on Friday night. For some of us such stories are further proof where little more was needed of a whole series of Don Américo's observations, especially those about the half-consciousness and the ironic layering of cultural markers in the tragic years of Inquisition and Expulsions.

But Netanyahu has very little sense of such complexity, let alone of irony or ironic cultural overlays. His opening salvo is thus directed at Don Americo's statements about the concept of "purity of blood" being a notion that was linked, originally, to the Jewish communities and their own sense of their separateness as a community, a separateness that the Jewish community believed (thus Castro's argument) would transcend the particulars of language and customs of a given historical moment. Netanyahu's attack on Castro, which begins but does not end with this particular expression on Castro's part of the fundamental interrelationship of the various strands of medieval "Spanish" culture, is stunningly devoid of context. And by this I mean the intellectual context, first of all, of Castro's work in and of itself, of its unambiguous intent to combat the powerfully anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic visions which had previously dominated the writing of medieval Spanish cultural history. And it is also true that Netanyahu ignores, as if he were merely a part of the PC patrols sent out to police the writings of our elders and thus inferiors, the intellectual and cultural climate in which Castro was educated, and against which he was rebelling, but in whose language he was, *faute de mieux*, writing. It seems to me, on the one hand, inconceivable that anyone can have read any sustained passages from Castro's work ---let alone the often-vicious attacks on that work written by the Sánchez-Albornoz from whom he is supposedly essentially indistinguishable ---and not have glimpsed the complex essence of his arguments: the lack of unbridgeable or impenetrable identities or "essences" in the Spain of the three religions, how this universe of complex identities leads to superb cultural innovations -- and, how it ends, tragically, with the often ironic "cross-overs" and confusing admixtures of markers of identity, especially during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when two of the three religious identities were being aggressively eliminated. It is of course true that Castro, like everyone else in history except, perhaps, some of the great Sufi saints, is likely to fall into the banal traps of prejudice and linguistic limitations of his own age ---but who among us would want to wager that our own writing and speech and concepts of identity will be as virtuous as we think them to be in fifty or a hundred years?

One wonders if Netanyahu would be capable (for example) of understanding the sad irony of Cervantes when in chapter 9 of the *Quixote* he has the morisco translator of the newly-found manuscript laugh aloud at a note written in the margin that says: "They say that Dulcinea del Toboso, so often mentioned in this history, was the best hand at salting pork of any woman in La Mancha." It has only been in the aftermath of Castro's eye-opening work that lines and sentiments such as this, with their full-blown tragedy rather thinly disguised as comedy, that we have been able to appreciate that in the Spain recounted by Cervantes it was beleaguered Jews and Muslims (or crypto-Jews and crypto-Muslim, who among us, besides Netanyahu, will want to play the role of all-seeing God and presume to tell what is in a man's heart under such circumstances?) who would often adopt in the most exaggerated forms, sometimes consciously, just as often not, the mannerisms that supposedly most distinguished Old from New Christians. Don Quixote's girlfriend, we are now well aware, is no doubt from a converso family. And it is one thing to have to explain such things, the bittersweetness of the verbal (usually with no appreciable success) to readers of Cervantes who, despite Castro, want to pretend that the momentous events of the times had no appreciable or "literary" effect on the great novelist. But it is quite another, and an unusually sad thing, to stand accused of anti-Semitism for pointing such things out, or to explain to a student of sixteenth-century Spanish history ---which is what Netanyahu is, after all ---why these identity issues are so complex that they involve first and foremost abandoning most fixed notions of what is "really" Jewish or "really" Muslim or, perhaps most of all, "really" Christian.

Part of what is wonderful and liberating about Castro's work is precisely that it points to all the ways in which cultural markings cross all the expected lines, and "influence," in good times as well as in bad, is a subtle and sometimes unconsciously subversive thing. Spain, of course, before as well as after it was "Spain," is as rich an example of such human tendencies as any, and one need only visit the two gorgeous synagogues of Toledo (both built in conspicuous mudejar style), or the Church of San Roman there (built to commemorate the "conquest" of Toledo in 1085, also in mudejar style, and this one even with fake Arabic writing around the windows) or attend the Latin Mozarabic Mass at the Cathedral, to understand all this. Or if not to understand it at least to perceive that categories such as "anti-Semitic" can be as blunt as "Spanish" or "Jewish" or "Muslim," and that "anti-Semitism," as an essential and eternal universal, is a problematic construct precisely seen within the history of Spain. Indeed, part of the potential tragedy of this kind of misrepresentation of Don Américo and his legacy is that by focusing so unrelentingly on the tragic outcome of a considerable span of history Netanyahu reinforces the sort of monolithically negative view of the relations among the three religions that is precisely what Don Américo so vehemently opposed. Who, reading these essays (let alone the Inquisition book), would know that the Golden Age of the Jews had taken place in this same land?

But this question ---let alone any of the possible answers -- leads us to the most crucial gap and lack of subtlety of all, and the Achilles' heel, it seems to me, for any claim Netanyahu might have for the historical import and relevance he so covets. Nowhere in Netanyahu's lengthy argumentation is there any significant mention of the Muslims, or of the fact that a significant part of the cultural and linguistic baggage of the Jews of "Spain" they brought from years of living, along with Christians, in the dhimma communities of Islamic Spain. Nowhere is there any discussion of any appreciable substance of the Moriscos, as the remaining Muslims would be called after 1500, when they too, like the Jews, would be forced to convert to Christianity, and when the Inquisition was as attentive (and brutal) to their imaginary or real trespasses as to those of others. And nowhere is the innocent reader likely to find out that while the former Jews qua conversos were never officially expelled, although God knows they were hounded by the Inquisition, the Moriscos, whose spiritual conversions and whose cultural adaptations and misadaptations remain as complex and often impenetrable as those of the Marranos, were in the end expelled for transparently political reasons. Even a cursory laying out of these differences and similarities, of the common history, and of the questions they so patently raise, reveals the gaping flaws in Netanyahu's arguments: if one kind of persecution was racial -- and not religious or cultural, let alone political -- then how and why was the other, taking place at the same time, with the same forms, under the same institutions and often in the identical language, something so radically different? It is not so much that Netanyahu answers this and a dozen related questions in a way that I or anyone else might disagree with but rather that he never asks such a question. In the Spain of Benzion Netanyahu there were, in effect, no Muslims, let alone persecuted crypto-Muslims -- and if there were any they had nothing in common with the Jews. The relevance of this vision to ". . . ^Êa number of social trends and patterns that had their beginnings in those stormy times and continued into the modern age to create some of the grave problems with which humanity wrestles to this very day . . ." as Netanyahu himself puts it in the last lines of the preface, hardly needs further commentary.

I believe Netanyahu's animosity and the bitterness of his attacks on a scholar such as Américo Castro reflects in some measure (and I would not presume to say how conscious a measure that might be) not any genuine reaction to perceived anti-Semitism, but instead a hostility towards the vision of

"convivencia" for which Don Américo is so rightly famous. And for which the likes of Sánchez-Albornoz excoriated him. And for which he is to this day barely discussed in a Spain that is still distinctly uncomfortable with those notions about its past -- more uncomfortable, it should be added, with the Castro notion that it was so vitally Jewish and Muslim, once upon a time, than with the "black legend" that it was unusually anti-Semitic. Don Américo's greater sin for Netanyahu may have to do with the sort of thing that can be passed off as anti-Semitism in the decontextualized remarks about "purity of the blood" but is really about the sort of interfaith intimacies that led, long before the Inquisition, to the flourishing of Jewish culture, and the reinvention of Hebrew vernacular literature, and a host of other remarkably positive things. In some measure, in fact, the purposeful decontextualization of Castro's statement about "purity of the blood" has to do with forgetting that all of Castro is about such reflexive and deeply-seated cultural intercourse, sometimes for great good, sometimes for ill, always to the chagrin and annoyance of cultural purists, both then and now.

Chapters, with original dates of publication:

1. The Racial Attack on the Conversos (1979)
2. Alonso de Espina: Was He a New Christian? (1976)
3. Sánchez-Albornoz' View of Jewish History in Spain (1995)
4. The Conversion of Don Samuel Abravanel (1997)
5. Did the Toledans in 1449 Rely on a Real Royal Privilege? (1977)
6. The Historical Significance of the Hebrew Sources concerning the Marranos (1980)
7. "The Primary Cause of the Spanish Inquisition" (1984)