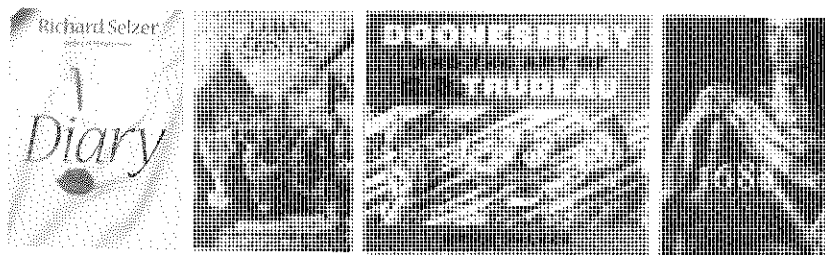


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and augments the thingness, the materiality of the poems used in this way. And that is why I can say, if I have sufficiently argued the case, that for Nobutada the six poems he wrote out on the surface of the six panels of the Yale screen are indeed, and always were, *things*, like all their kind – things to be made much of, or *things* to make *something* of, such as something like a narrative that is not one, such as an integrated image that is made from disparate texts.

Or perhaps what was made in this instance of production and reproduction is also but not much more than a thing *to be seen* – which is surely something. If a text can indeed be an image and an image can be a text, then it follows that “reading” and “seeing” also overlap, repeatedly yielding to and displacing each other, or informing each other. In other words, perhaps Nobutada’s screen is truly best understood quite literally as “ink play” or its traces – a rewriting of letters that make up words chosen by others, in other times and places, to be formed into poems, then at subsequent stages in their afterlives recorded and rewritten and now, at the tip of Nobutada’s brush, written down once again to form this design – eye-catching, intriguing, boldly testing our capacity and willingness to accept what may be an exasperating but also exhilarating multivalence out of which we may or may not be able to identify, unambiguously, just what it is that we see, what it is that we think we can read. Nobutada, that wily, eccentric, aristocratic amateur, still has his way: he bids us to look and to follow the traces of his brush as it makes its way across space and time, even now, even here.

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R E M E M B E R I N G
J O H N B O S W E L L ' S
M E D I E V A L S P A I N

M A R J A R O S A M E N O C A L

I first arrived at Yale in the fall of 1986 for what I imagined might be only a year as a visiting professor in the Spanish Department, which had recently lost its medievalist. This was, in fact, something of an odd turn in my career, since I was not a conventional Spanish medievalist. My training was in Romance philology, and at the University of Pennsylvania, where I had studied and then remained on the faculty for a few years, I taught courses on poetry across that broad range of languages that today we would rather conveniently refer to as “Mediterranean studies”: from Provençal to Sicilian to Hispano-Arabic. So it was that one of the courses I gave that first year at Yale was outside the Spanish Department, with the clunky title of “Comparative Medieval Romance Lyric” in the “Literature major,” as the comparative literature division of the undergraduate curriculum is called. In my previous experience, at Penn, I had found that this kind of seminar really also had to serve as an introduction to the social and intellectual culture of the Middle Ages, since students tended to have little sense of the broad features of that period within which this great lyric tradition makes any sense: Why were some of the texts I had chosen poems originally written in Hebrew and Arabic when the course title

dedicated it was about “Romance”? How could the medievals – those invariably devout people, according to our students, then and now – have written so many poems marked by such frank, even vulgar, sexuality – and a number of those homoerotic sexuality at that? Even though this was still the age of high theory, and even though I had studied in a department suffused with the ideology of the “text itself,” I had found, if nothing else as a practical matter, that it was impossible or perhaps just silly to read a troubadour love poem, let alone a bilingual *muwashshah* from eleventh-century Seville, without doing considerable historical stage setting.

Only a few days into the semester, probably the second or third class, I was doing a spiel I had developed at Penn which amounted to a little mini-course on the intellectual atmosphere of Paris in the early twelfth century, and it involved having the students read the marvelous letters of Abelard and Heloise. This was an exercise that allowed me to illustrate many vital propositions at once, not least the existence of an intellectually powerful and erotically charged female voice. It also nicely furthered one of the goals of my little potted history – to give some sense of the ways in which the Islamo-Arabic universe centered in Spain at that time was already, at the beginning of the twelfth century, a source of intellectual prestige and influence, the seemingly improbable site of cultural chic for Latin Christendom. The rhetorical climax was intended to come when I revealed to the students the name that Abelard and Heloise gave to the child born of their passionate and disastrous affair. It was always a great moment since students never knew the child’s name – Astrolabe – and were appropriately astonished and intrigued when I explained what an astrolabe was and where it came from and what the whole thing might mean, this story of how an intellectually avant-garde couple had chosen such a strange and yet distinctly evocative name for their offspring. I especially loved being able to use this story to make a fundamental point about Christianity at that moment: it was not monolithic or single-minded and far from uniformly closed-minded or intolerant. Even at such a moment, when there was, in fact, an unambiguous crusader mentality vis à vis Islam in some quarters – and how convenient that Bernard of Clairvaux, who set in motion the Third Crusade, is a part of that scene and a player in the life of Abelard, as well as Peter the Venerable – in other

quarters one might well find far more curious and positive attitudes about the Hispano-Arabic world.

So . . . my little set piece could be established with relative economy: the twelfth century, when much of the great poetry that was the subject of my course was created, was a far more complex place than the tag “medieval” might have conveyed to my students, and the poetry itself was not anomalous but one of the salient features of a remarkable landscape. I then arrived at the “Ah ha!” moment, when I asked my Yale students what I assumed would be an unanswerable question for them: “And what do you think Abelard and Heloise named their child?” To my surprise several hands went up in the air. I called on one of the students, who matter-of-factly answered, “Astrolabe.” Astonished I said, well, yes, indeed, and what do you think that means? Another group of students put their hands in the air, and then came the answer: “Professor Boswell says it’s because Abelard was the Frank Zappa of the Middle Ages.” I know – I remember it quite vividly – that my mouth dropped open, although no one else in the room batted an eyelash. “He says,” that student, or perhaps another, continued, “that it’s because naming the kid Astrolabe was like Zappa’s naming his kid Moon Unit.” “And it shows,” piped up yet another, “that he was in the intellectual and cultural avant-garde, which is what Spain was all about . . .”

I knew, in that moment, that I was in a very different world from any I had ever been in before, and that this “Professor Boswell,” whoever he was, had obviously created a series of attitudes and understandings about the Middle Ages that were far from the ones that in my experience were nearly universal. By the end of the day I had discovered not only that Boswell was the author of a book that I confess I did not yet know, a book with the more-than-provocative title *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, but also that his courses on the Middle Ages, especially his “Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in Medieval Europe” – another extraordinary novelty, in my experience, not only in the comparison of the three faiths but in the explicit recognition of the centrality of Judaism and Islam in the formation of medieval Europe – were taken by hundreds of Yale students. That afternoon I began to understand something that had seemed previously unimaginable: why I had a whole classroom of undergraduates who knew that

Peter Abelard was, indeed, the Frank Zappa of the Middle Ages. And, *narrabile dictu*, for them this was a European Middle Ages within which Spain was not, as it almost invariably was – and still often is – marginal, if not altogether absent; and it was a Spain, in turn – as I was to discover as soon as I got my hands on that book I hadn't known of but which was in fact known to everyone else – in which the authors of Hispano-Arabic poetry lived matter-of-factly side by side with Church fathers.

I have long been struck by the fact that so few people remember John Boswell as a historian of medieval Spain. This is partly because his work in other areas has had such an extraordinary impact, and also because he never finished the book he was already working on when he published *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*: on the dust jacket of the first editions of the book the reader is alerted to the fact that the provocatively young and sexy assistant professor is at work on a book entitled *The Three Religions of Medieval Spain*. But of course, even if he had lived to write a hundred books focused on medieval Spain, or with medieval Spain as their purported topic, they would always have been also about a hundred different things, and I suspect that their author would still be remembered as he is now – as a great thinker about the history of sexuality within the context of the unsuspected complexities of medieval societies in general. He would never have been, in other words, merely a historian a medieval Spain.

And yet it does him a great disservice to forget the centrality of Boswell's exceptional knowledge of and deep involvement with medieval Spain to his general approach to history and to his path-breaking work in other areas. Moreover, his was not just any medieval Spain, and certainly not the old-school medieval Spain that so many still believe in, whose only authentic citizens were Islamophobic Christians or whose only proper languages were Latin and Castilian. No, indeed, Boswell's was rather a version of that time and place whose defining characteristics were rooted in the complex and all-encompassing coexistence of the three Abrahamic religions. And this Spain mattered to him a great deal, despite the considerable misprison in many quarters that Boswell's early work on Spain was somehow a "cover" – a conventional way of earning his academic credentials in a "mainstream" field before

he turned to his real interests in gay studies. Even though Boswell is himself apparently quoted as saying something along these lines, it seems to me that the relations among these different parts of his work were much more intimate and seamless, and that Spain was not a cover but rather a first and true love.

Boswell's first book, his doctoral dissertation, published by Yale University Press in 1977, is called *The Royal Treasure: Muslim Communities Under the Crown of Aragon in the Fourteenth Century*, and it is a study focused on what are called the *Mudejares*, from the Arabic word *mudajjan*, "those who remain." *Mudejar* is the name given to the Muslims who, after Christians took political control of long-held Islamic territories starting in 1085, remained and lived under Christian rule, along with communities of Jews, who had themselves long lived under Islamic rule. One of the defining qualities of medieval Spain is that its history offers a series of very different polities, some Islamic, some Christian, which had legal means and traditional mechanisms for the accommodation of the other "Peoples of the Book." The basis of these is the *dhimma*, or "pact" (from the Arabic), and this Quranically based mechanism provides for the accommodation within Islamic societies of other monotheists with scriptural traditions ("books") – which in effect means Christians and Jews. This practice was brought to Spain in 711 by the conquering Muslims and became a deep part of the social fabric there over the next several centuries.

So engrained as a way of living, and ruling, did this approach to the problem of a society with three competing Abrahamic communities become, in fact, that when Christians began what is somewhat misleadingly called the *Reconquista* – their conquest of Islamic territories – they too adopted such practices, crafting capitulation agreements with conquered cities that read very much like the *dhimma*, and allowing, indeed at times encouraging, Muslims as well as Jews to remain in their newly Christian polities. It is true, of course, that these political arrangements were immensely vulnerable precisely because they had something less than zero standing in Church doctrine. Nevertheless, they functioned, sometimes even reasonably well; but even when the situation was less than optimal the underappreciated fact of Christian Spanish life from the end of the eleventh century until sometime toward the middle of the fourteenth century – and this was a fact

that the Church outside Spain found hard to fathom or stomach — is that it was often lived side by side with Muslims and Jews.

Of course — this is where one has to loudly make the ritual disclaimer or be accused of naïveté, or worse — of course, it was not modern legal equality, “tolerance,” to use a key word in Boswell’s great work. But what Boswell understood, and taught to hundreds of students at Yale every year, was precisely the foolish vanity of measuring another age’s social realities by idealized conceits about our own: “The most misleading parallels are temporal ones,” he points out in one of the concluding chapters of that first book of his in a passage on the question of the oppression of the Mudejares, and this is an observation that might also have been written about the fate of Christians in Islamic Spain or that of Jews in either Islamic or Christian Spain. “It is almost fatally tempting,” he goes on, “for the modern historian, living in an egalitarian society and highly sensitive to the interests of minority groups, to draw invidious comparisons between the treatment or status of minorities in his own societies and those in the societies he studies. Such comparisons are extremely risky. It must be remembered that medieval Spain was not and did not pretend to be an egalitarian society. Nobody — including the Mudejares — would have claimed that they were equal under the law, or that religious or ethnic minorities had a ‘right’ to equal treatment or status.” “Despite the lack of theoretical equality under the law,” he goes on to say a few sentences later, “there was . . . overwhelming de facto equality in many areas of Christian-Muslim co-existence, an equality which might justly evoke the envy of modern minorities.”

In this passage, and throughout the book, Boswell is at pains to reveal several of the most provocative lessons to be learned from the study of medieval Spain, lessons that self-evidently would have a profound impact on his later work and, indeed, that were a fundamental part of his life and worldview. Principal among these, perhaps, are that the medieval period included societies that were more tolerant of “others” than many of those that followed, and that there are chapters — and they are mostly medieval, and some of the most striking are in Spain — in the history of Christian societies where “social tolerance” was a fact of everyday life. For a number of critics of *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, Boswell, known to be a devout convert to Catholicism, was

writing as an apologist for the Church; but for those of us who have spent a lifetime dwelling on the rampant misconceptions of medieval Spain, not least of these the gross cliché that Spanish Christianity was always defined by its rabid Reconquest opposition to Islam, Boswell’s appreciation of the long history of the “tolerance” of Christian societies is defining, and it was and is shared by others who can scarcely be accused of being apologists for the Church.

At the heart of this different historical reality lies a concept of identity based not just on “complexity” — at the end of the day this is too vague a term — but on what might be understood as the accommodation of distinct contradictions: medieval Spain was, from the eighth century until well until the thirteenth, and sometimes beyond, a land of Arabic-speaking and Arabic-loving Christians; of Muslim rulers who surrounded themselves with Jewish courtiers and Christian lovers; of churchmen who might have been propagandists for anti-Islamic crusades and yet be buried in Kufic-embroidered gowns. This latter was the case with Rodrigo Ximenez de Rada, the archbishop of Toledo in the early thirteenth century, who wrote the majority of the Latin histories of Spain that give the most strident and uncompromising view of Christians as enemies of Islam. Yet Rodrigo was an Arabist himself and, perhaps even more to the point, a player in a cultural scene where admiration and adaptation of many of the features of Arabo-Islamic civilization (including the tradition of reading and commenting on Greek philosophy in Arabic) were far from precluded by contradistinct ideological views. Tokens of this aesthetic intimacy are abundant and wonderfully visible in much of the art and architecture of the moment and no less audible in the poetry, especially the love poetry:

I’d give everything I own for that fawn
 who betrayed me —
 my love for him locked in my heart,
 He said to the rising moon:
 “You see how I shine
 and dare to be seen?
 And the circle was set in the sky
 like a pearl in a dark girl’s palm.

This is one of hundreds of poems from the great tradition of the new Hebrew poetry that begins to flourish in the eleventh century, now brilliantly collected and translated by Peter Cole in his groundbreaking volume poetically entitled *The Dream of the Poem*. This is the poetry written by the thoroughly Arabized Jews of Spain (Sefarad, in Hebrew), a body of lyrics at the heart of what the great scholar of Jewish history S. D. Goitein called “the Spanish miracle”: the historical turning point when, among other things, Jews re-invented Hebrew as a language that could speak of human love and longing for the first time since the age of David. This small poem was written by a man we remember as Samuel the Nagid, of eleventh-century Granada, a remarkable character who was not only a powerful figure within the government of his Islamic Taifa (city-state) – even leading armies to battle against other Islamic Taifas – but also the Nasi, or head of the Jewish community, its profoundly respected rabbi. His first editor was his son Joseph, who comments in his introduction to an anthology of his father’s lyrics: “And though some of his verses speak of desire, he wrote in full faith.” Nineteenth- and twentieth-century editors and commentators, most of them extremely uncomfortable with the idea that a pillar of the community would have been involved in a homosexual relationship, have taken this to mean that Joseph is properly insisting that the poetry must be interpreted allegorically – that this and the many other instances of homosexual love and desire throughout this corpus did not mean that these men were speaking about such relationships in their lives, but rather that they were merely working inside a poetic tradition, one clearly adapted from Arabic models, where such poetry is commonplace, despite the draconian Quranic strictures against homosexuality.

Many pages of *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* are devoted to what might seem to be the inexplicably widespread presence of homoerotic poetry in medieval Spain, and one of the many things that made this a revolutionary book – although it is not often noted – is precisely that Boswell does write about those splendid bodies of Arabic and Hebrew and mixed-language poetry matter-of-factly, without a trace of apology, as if everyone understood that these were as much a part of Western Europe as the Latin verses he discusses on the same pages. Which of course is far from being the case, not only in 1980 but still, largely, today,

when the poetry written in one neighborhood of a medieval city such as Toledo or Seville is still most likely to be studied in a different department from the poetry written in an adjacent neighborhood, perhaps even in the same household. And Boswell also rightly dismisses as inadequate all approaches to such poetry that reduce the matter to poetic convention or mere allegory. There is a way of understanding Joseph’s comment about his father’s homoerotic poems as something more complex, more Andalusian, more FitzGeraldian, more Boswellian: he meant that his father was pious *and* that he was capable of human passions and desires that sometimes went against the laws and the pieties of the institutions that housed his beliefs in the world.

Love itself, with its often puzzling power to contradict and reshape, is very much at the heart of the matter here, and perhaps at the heart of what first attached Boswell to Spain, which dazzles with unpredictable love stories: the love for Islamic architecture of the Christians who conquered Toledo and made it the centerpiece of their realm, or the love for Arabic philosophy of the Islamic tradition of a Jewish rabbi, or the endless varieties of impossible loves expressed in just about every example of the great courtly poetries that are the hallmark of the age. How often passion ends up pitting us against laws and ideology and easy pieties, and yet to be able to recognize passion’s equal if not superior claims on our loyalties, and to try to figure out how to give each its rightful claim, is the mark of a superior civilization, and individual. This was a place the scholar and the gay Christian man clearly loved, this place where the realities and truths of coexistence and poetry were not obliterated by the competing truths of legal institutions and theological certainties. Where men could be pious and indeed revered rabbis and write love songs to their male beloveds.

One of my last memories of Boswell, before he became so ill that he could no longer teach or speak in public, is of sitting in on a talk that he delivered informally to a group at Yale. Although I can no longer remember the exact circumstances, I remember what he said vividly. He was talking about Spain, particularly about the issue of interfaith conversions, a vast problem that worried all three religious communities, for hundreds of years. Conversion from one of the Abrahamic communities to another is a key phenomenon in

medieval Spain from the time of the first conversions of Christians to Islam in the eighth century – which were eventually so widespread that at a certain point the majority of Muslims were descendants of converts – until the last of the Jews and Muslims were expelled in the early modern era, leaving behind whole communities of their coreligionists who converted in order to be able to remain in their beloved, now cruel, homeland. Boswell made a cool and characteristically meticulous scholarly analysis of the different causes and circumstances of conversion, as they are conventionally dissected, but as he moved toward the end of his talk he said something like this: “But what is remarkable is that historians, in fact, never deal with what is the principal cause of conversion, because they can’t deal with it analytically, objectively; they can’t really document it, and at the end of the day they are embarrassed by it” – you could hear a pin drop as everyone waited to hear what this mysterious cause might be – “Love. Love is sometimes the principal reason that some people convert.”

In his *Defence of Poetry* Percy Bysshe Shelley makes the wonderful observation that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, and it is vital to recognize that Boswell was revolutionary as a historian in some measure because he was, at least in this, of the party of Shelley. The monuments of love, he says in his great book, are principally literary. By valuing so highly the evidence of poetry, and thus of love, he was able to reconstruct a universe in which love was explicitly in dialogue with ideology, and where it did not always lose the argument. Medieval Spain was such a universe – not the only one, of course, but one that he knew intimately – a universe of dozens of love-versus-law dialogues, an almost overwhelming kaleidoscope of confrontations between one form of passion and some species of ideology. Most of all, and this clearly thanks to the Arabic poetic tradition, it was a place in which love poetry, as we can glimpse behind Joseph’s remark about his father’s verses, was understood to be a central part of civilization itself, one of the markers of its truth and reality. Thus, if poetry spoke about a truth – desire, or passion, or love – that was at apparent odds with another truth – faith, or religious law – then history was going to have to grapple with such contradictions and would ultimately need to take both seriously because both desire and faith are part of the human condition, and both

are part of our achievements even, perhaps especially, when they contradict each other.

The right ending, it seems to me, for this small remembrance of one scholar’s great love and the way it informed so much of his work, is a near-cliché: the final verses of one of the best poems ever written about the shapes of love and the power of the poetic imagination to confront simplistic orthodoxies. The poem was written in Arabic in the early thirteenth century by the great Sufi from Murcia, Ibn ‘Arabi, and it has been movingly translated into English by Michael Sells in *Stations of Desire* (2000). In its fullness, “Gentle now, doves” revels in the overlaps among the different kinds of love in our universe, and especially celebrates love as a phenomenon that elides the line between the erotic and the sacred and then, in turn, the one between the varieties of sacred.

A white-blazed gazelle
Is an amazing sight,
Red-dye signaling,
eyelids hinting,
Pasture between breastbones
And innards.
Marvel,
A garden among the flames!

My heart can take on
Any form:
Gazelles in a meadow,
A cloister for monks,
For the idols, sacred ground,
Kaaba for the circling pilgrim,
The tables of a Torah,
The scrolls of the Qur’an

I profess the religion of love;
Wherever its caravan turns
Along the way, that is the belief,
The faith I keep.