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REVIEW ARTICLE

THE AGE OF OTHERS

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[On Maria Rosa Menocal's *Shards of Love: Exile and the Origins of the Lyric*
(Duke University Press, 1994)]

In contemporary public discourse the adjective "medieval" functions—when it does not just mean "barbaric" pure and simple—as a synonym for "intolerant," "self-centered," "narrow-minded," "dogmatic," "doctrinaire," "mentally inflexible," "fascist," "cruel." Medieval Europeans were those people who, out of an ignorance of alternative ways and possibilities caused by a paucity of encounters with others, thought they were always right. It was not until, say, 1492, that Europe discovered others, had meaningful encounters with others. The eventual result of such encounters was that Europeans learned about the relativity of social norms and beliefs, became tolerant of cultural differences. The culmination of this tolerance for alternative visions is the Enlightenment, an age that produces a book such as Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, in which the author, posing as a Muslim visitor to France, intentionally defamiliarizes his own European culture, makes the institutions of his own land seem every bit as bizarre, as arbitrary, as remote from some imagined universal "standard" or "norm" as seem the institutions of non-European others.¹ Nowadays we bask in the afterglow of that Enlightenment's light, we modern (non-medieval) Westerners, we who grant everyone the right to believe what he or she wishes and the right to behave accordingly.² And if someone denies someone else that right, he or she is being not just an ogre but specifically a "medieval" one, a throwback to the Dark Ages, exhibiting the limitations of those unfortunate souls who lived in the era before a certain kind of light dawned on Europeans, who were cloaked in

¹ On the *Lettres persanes*, see James Creech, "Others," in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 409-415.

² This myth that tolerance for diverse views is a specifically modern (and not a medieval) quality is constantly perpetuated even by those who ought to know better; Richard Rorty, for instance, opens his book *Contingency, irony, solidarity* with an epigraph, drawn from Milan Kundera's *The Art of the Novel*, part of which says the following: "... the art that created the fascinating imaginative realm where no one owns the truth and everyone has a right to be understood. That imaginative realm of tolerance was born with modern Europe."

a specific kind of darkness—namely, a supremely ethnocentric blindness to other cultures, an incapacity to conceive of truth in any manner but the most selfishly provincial.³

This idea that the “modern” (that is, the “non-medieval”) goes hand-in-hand with an enlightened openness to others, a lucid acknowledgement of cultural relativism, cannot be believed after Auschwitz. So perhaps it is only through a return to the medieval that we will find the values we have needed. For what is truly and essentially medieval is the tolerance of difference, the easy cohabitation with others, the cosmopolitan cultivation of fragmentation. This, one of the several stunning claims of Maria Rosa Menocal’s *Shards of Love*, will undoubtedly shock all non-medievalists and a goodly number of medievalists as well. Yet, just a few moments reflection is enough to see that such a thesis is not only imaginable but indeed worthy of our assent. Let us consider, for example, the discourse of philosophy. The medieval way, the way of Aquinas (the way of all scholastic philosophers), is to entertain, without disdain, *all* possible alternative responses to a question—and not just to entertain them, but to go so far as to publish them, virtually without distortion, interwoven into the very text in which one proclaims one’s own preferred way of looking at the issue. Other philosophical beliefs, particularly those of the Arabic philosophers, are neither repressed nor rejected out of hand, are not ridiculed but rather are taken seriously as worthy rival vocabularies against which one must contend. The medieval way is the way of the marvelous thirteenth-century Majorcan-born Ramon Llull, a polyglot polymath, novelist, logician, philosopher, missionary, founder of the European academic study of Oriental languages, who takes turns writing in Catalan, Latin, and Arabic and whose vast corpus includes lengthy and accurate accounts of the teachings of all three monotheisms. For Llull, philosophy is first and foremost a pretext, an excuse to force oneself to encounter others on their own intellectual terrain. In the *Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men*—a work written, Llull says, “for enlightening clouded minds . . . and for entering into union with and getting to know strangers and friends”⁴—a character called the Gentile (that is, a pagan, one who does not believe in the One God) follows a path into a clearing in the forest, where he encounters three wise men, a Jew, a Muslim, a Christian. Each of the three takes his turn giving a philosophical account of his religious doctrines. The Gentile,

³ A few days after I wrote the first draft of this paragraph, the gist of it was starkly confirmed by something on television: a *Saturday Night Live* parody TV commercial depicting humans deriving gleeful pleasure from a cockroach trap that operates by subjecting its insect victims to every manner of exceedingly grotesque torture; the commercial ended with the slogan “Go Medieval!”

⁴ *Selected Works of Ramon Llull*, ed. and trans. Anthony Bonner, Vol. I (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), p. 301.

persuaded by their reasonings that the One God exists, announces that henceforth he will worship God. But which of the three monotheisms does the Gentile deem to be more true than the others? A response to this question is forever deferred, as the Gentile, just on the verge of announcing which religion he will choose, is silenced by the three wise men:

But before the three wise men left, the Gentile asked them in astonishment why they did not wait to hear which religion he would choose in preference to the others. The three wise men answered, saying that, in order for each to be free to choose his own religion, they preferred not knowing which religion he would choose. “And all the more so since this is a question we could discuss among ourselves to see, by force of reason and by means of our intellects, which religion it must be that you will choose. And if, in front of us, you state which religion it is that you prefer, then we would not have such a good subject of discussion nor such satisfaction in discovering the truth.”⁵

Little does it matter to the wise men that their religions be proven right (insofar as the Gentile’s preference would count as a sort of proof); what matters is that each be allowed to go on believing that his religion is right. The pragmatic benefits of belief—any belief—take precedence over the necessity for certain or true belief. The question “Which of the three monotheisms is true?” is left unanswered so that it may function as the pretext that brings the three together for such “good discussion.” Philosophizing is meant to provide a peculiar sort of “satisfaction”—that of posing questions for which there are no answers. This is indeed the essence of philosophy: to enjoy spending one’s time working out solutions to insoluble problems. If in this early work Llull is promoting a sort of ecumenical Deism—an insistence that God exists yet a refusal to embrace the positive dogmas of a particular religion—in later works Llull is clearly on a mission to convert the world to one particular monotheism, Christianity. For this end, Llull armed himself with a weapon of his own invention, a brilliantly intricate systematic universal logic that he called his *Art*—a technique for the organization of knowledge that is perhaps unsurpassed, for its compass and its complexity, in the entire history of humankind. Rather like the twentieth-century logical positivists, for whom philosophical controversies are really just a result of the fact that we use misleading and incommensurate languages, and for whom such controversies will come to an end once we have invented an “ideal language,” a language that corresponds to the logic of the universe, Llull’s great dream was to translate Christian dogma into a sort of mathematics, an algebraic system of symbolic notations and operations, a system that all persons would universally acknowledge to be true. The most basic premise

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 300-301.

of such a project is that all persons, no matter "the faith in which they found themselves and in which they were raised by their parents and ancestors,"⁶ are intellectually capable of grasping truth. And when the older Lull composes a different version of the tale of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men, including it in his *Felix, or the Book of Wonders* (this time the question is answered, the Gentile prefers Christianity), it is only after having "for a long time thought about what the three wise men had said"⁷ that the Gentile announces his choice of religion—surely implying that a great deal of good may be said in behalf of Judaism and Islam. In Lull's discourse, as in that of Aquinas, rival beliefs are deemed worthy of serious consideration, respect is granted to holders of those beliefs, even if in the end one decides to reject those beliefs as partially or even totally erroneous. Now, contrast the sort of openness to others' thinking exhibited by Aquinas and Lull with the famous founding moment of what has ever since been called "modern" (in explicit contrast with medieval or "scholastic") philosophy, the moment of Descartes' much-vaunted self-doubt. This Cartesian doubt turns out upon closer inspection to be an extreme form of self-certainty: Descartes consigns to the trash-heap of irrelevant history everything that all others have ever said or written. I need not read any books written by others (I, unlike the "schoolmen" of old, need not go to school) says Descartes, because I shall grant legitimacy or validity only to what *I* think, only to the sum of cogitations that come from *my* own ego. Descartes would have had no truck with thinkers who gather in a forest clearing taking turns exchanging versions of truth. Descartes' method is nothing other than the closing off of his mind to the appeal of alternative visions. The medieval philosopher is always far and away more skeptical, more attuned to alterity, more cosmopolitan and less smugly provincial, than is the pseudo-skeptic Descartes, father of modern philosophy.

If Menocal is right that the passing of the Middle Ages is the passing of a certain level of general tolerance for cultural differences, then 1492 does not signal the beginning of progress toward a world of openness to otherness but rather a regression away from just such a world, the end of an already established multiculturalism. As Part I of *Shards of Love* argues, 1492 spells the end of a lyric world (a world of multiplicity, heterogeneity, inclusion, contradiction, paradox) and the beginning of a narrative world (a world of singularity, homogeneity, exclusion, reason, grammar).⁸ This is not some

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 697.

⁸ For a related account of "lyric" and "narrative" discourses in the late Middle Ages, see my *The Death of the Troubadour: The Late Medieval Resistance to the Renaissance* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).

abstract allegorical generalization; rather, it is an argument meant, in part at least, to be taken quite literally, an argument grounded in a concrete, specific historical event: in 1492, on the same day that Columbus set sail for what would become known as the New World, the Jews were exiled from Spain. This exile was the last straw in a series of events, the final death knell for medieval Iberia, a place that medievalists recognize as having enjoyed "an ethnic and religious variety that would be unequalled in Europe thereafter" (p. 37). Medieval Iberia is an amalgam of diverse peoples, languages, and beliefs, a land of interminglings: "Here, mosques are around every corner, and the Other lives next door, and all manner of unwritten languages are heard in the marketplace in the early morning" (45). Only after a series of expulsions, exiles, "reconquests," and inquisitions, culminating with the deportation of the Jews in 1492, only when the medieval amalgam is a thing of the past, do we speak of there being such a place as "Spain," one nation filling up, with a single unified substance and to the limits of geographical possibility, the whole Iberian peninsula. This is the beginning of nationalism, the construction of a nation in and through the destruction of a prior multicultural diversity. The birth of the nation is bound up with the exile of the Jews, among others. I think we are licensed to say that the goal of Menocal's project is to institute a shift in our lexicon, such that the opposite of "medieval" is "Nazi." And she is saying that the best way to understand the greatest monuments of medieval culture is to bear this in mind: the essence of the medieval is its priority to, its resistance to, the birth of nations. The great medieval poets and thinkers—the ones who name the essence of the Middle Ages—are the ones who promote what we call multiculturalism, the ones who preach tolerance for difference and who refuse to mistake their contingent inventions for absolute, universal, and natural necessities.

This nationalism, the legacy of that which is symbolized by 1492, has had no small retarding effect on our capacity even to perceive this essence, this openness to others, as the essence of the medieval. Those who will be most shocked by Menocal's thesis will be those who have been most surreptitiously formed by the ideologies of modern nationalism. For modern universities have imposed a totally anachronistic grid on the Middle Ages, setting national and disciplinary boundaries on a discourse that ignored such divisions. Worst of all is the wholesale expulsion of Islamic thinking from its rightful place very near the heart of medieval Christian thinking, the glossing over of the massive indebtedness of medieval European philosophy to the Arabic tradition.⁹ No less pernicious is the fact that nowadays we study medieval

⁹ On the enormity of this indebtedness, see Alain de Libera, *Penser au moyen âge* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1991).

vernacular literature in departments of French, Italian, Spanish, English — departments that do their best to hide the fact that in every place where literature was written in the Middle Ages it was written in various languages: persons who lived on the land mass presently known as England wrote in French, “Italians” such as Sordello wrote in Provençal, Normans (that is, descendants of Vikings) living in Sicily wrote in Italian; Catalonians (including Llull, until he bucked tradition by writing in Catalan), when they wrote vernacular literature, wrote in Provençal. Modern literary history, shaped by our predominantly nationalist critical traditions, has put little emphasis on this essential medieval openness to alterities, to linguistic and cultural exchanges and hybridizations. What national canon has made even a tiny space for Raimbaut de Vaquieras’s multilingual *descort* (“discord”), a love lyric written in five languages (Provençal, Italian, French, Gascon, Gallico-Portuguese) that alternate from stanza to stanza, one of the most profound of all medieval lyrics? The whole thrust of this *descort* is to destroy any notion that one’s identity (the identity of the “I” that speaks the poem) is equivalent to, or is grounded in, a nation’s identity; its purpose is to expose a discord between the writer and the writer’s nation, a gap that goes by the name “exile” in Menocal’s book.¹⁰ Even had such a poem been known to the modern tradition of nationalist literary history, it would have been repressed. It is only now that we have begun to break free of that tradition that we can proclaim such a poem to incarnate the essence of the medieval and can regard such an essence in a positive light.

I will not recount in detail any more of *Shards of Love*, instead leaving to the reader the felicity of discovering such things as: a deconstructive reading of the lyrics of Ibn ‘Arabi and Llull, arguing that those lyrics’ resistance to sensemaking or “narrative” exegesis is strategic, part of a political rhetoric meant to foster tolerance for others; an extremely forceful reading of Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia*, one that elevates a text that has probably always struck some readers as a relatively uninteresting hodgepodge into a *tour de force* of sustained and ironic anti-nationalist connotation; a rehabilitation of the reputation of the discipline of Romance Philology, demonstrating that the enterprises of such literary critics as Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer were in part motivated by their political concerns, as those critics did what they could in their chosen walk of life to wage ideological warfare against Nazism; a convincing argument (drawing on an analogy with modern rock music, in which the circulation and dissemination of traditions happens primarily through oral performance rather than through writing) in favor of the thesis that the traditions of medieval Arabic lyric, transmitted orally,

¹⁰ For a more detailed reading of Raimbaut de Vaquieras’s poem, see my *The Death of the Troubadour* (cited above), pp. 29-32.

profoundly shaped the “origin” of troubadour song (and hence of the entire European lyric tradition). But rather than relate the contents of *Shards of Love* in any greater detail, instead I shall close with a reflection on what the book tells us about the past and current history of American literary criticism and theory.

Menocal’s book offers superb evidence that the trajectory of latter twentieth-century American literary criticism, the movement from the New Criticism to deconstruction, is a solid continuum rather than a radical break; in a century or two historians will regard these two critical schools as part of the same tradition, united by common ideological purposes and a common view of what constitutes good literature. Here I am thinking of Menocal’s reading of Ibn ‘Arabi and Llull in the chapter entitled “Love and Mercy.” When Menocal celebrates these medieval lyric poets for exhibiting in their discourse “a union and re-union of opposites” (87), or, later on the same page, when she speaks of “the unions of (what seem to us) paradigmatic opposites in the writings of these poets,” these are the sorts of remarks that are music to the ears of both new-fashioned Derridean and de Manian deconstructionists and old-fashioned New Critics. Indeed Menocal’s language here is a virtual citation of one of the most influential of the New Critics, Cleanth Brooks, who speaks in “The Heresy of Paraphrase” of the good poem as that which “unites the like with the unlike” and which asserts “the union of opposites.”¹¹ And, when Menocal praises Ibn ‘Arabi and Llull for having “shut the door, as hard as [they] can, to exegesis” (86), that is, for not permitting the reader to generate a “narrative exegesis” (a non-contradictory, rational, coherent, sense-making interpretation), again we are not all that far from Brooks’ insistence that the good poem is that which cannot be paraphrased. Now, the deconstructionist and the New Critic share the same reason for praising poems that do not allow us to decide just what position is being taken by the poet: works that cannot be interpreted or paraphrased give a better, more accurate account of the very real complexity, the non-simplicity, the undecidability of all issues that pertain to human affairs than does ordinary, “narrative,” or common sense thought. (The only slightly significant difference between the New Criticism and deconstruction is that, whereas the New Critic is pretty certain that the poem is about the poet’s inability to decide, the [authentically de Manian] deconstructionist cannot decide whether or not the poem really is about the poet’s inability to decide.) In ordinary thought, things are either good or bad, x or y: you and your people are good, they and the others are bad; or, your belief is right, theirs is wrong. In fact (so insist both New Critics and deconstructionists), human

¹¹ “The Heresy of Paraphrase,” in *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1917).

affairs are much more ambiguous, the good and the bad might be at heart one and the same, x might be a sort of y and y sort of x , the differences might not be so absolute. Brooks calls this real complexity of human affairs "Irony." Normally, in the haste and hubbub of lived existence, in the midst of political and historical life, we do not have time for an ironic vision—since there are times when we are simply forced to decide either for or against, either to accept or to reject certain beliefs, either to follow or to discourage certain actions, either to embrace or to ostracize certain others. In political life, which is a matter of either/or decisions, we cannot stop and say, "There is much to be said on behalf of x , but on the other hand I also see a lot in favor of y "—since if we don't decide fairly quickly someone else will decide for us. Political action is in a sense nothing other than deciding to ignore Irony, deciding to discard indeterminacy. Whenever we do act, whenever we do decide, whenever we favor x over y , we have always made a choice that is in some sense wrong, because the human universe is one in which there are no absolutely right choices, in which there are two sides to every story. However, deciding to ignore the reasonable, partially legitimate claims of others in order to advance one's own beliefs is a necessary evil that can at least be mitigated to some degree—and this is where the poet plays a role in history. The poet can inculcate in everyone else the habit of slowing down, of hesitating to act rashly, of lingering, of mulling over the diverse sides of an issue. This delay of decision is called, by both New Critics and deconstructionists alike, "close reading"—a reading during which the reader constantly says to herself, "Wait a minute, perhaps I haven't gotten it just quite right, perhaps I have failed to see the other side of the coin." Those of us who read literature that cannot be interpreted, that cannot be paraphrased, we gradually get in the habit of delaying our decisions.¹² Such delay is another name for the tolerance of diversity. For American deconstruction and for New Criticism, good poetry is that which functions to increase the odds that more and more people will be less and less cruel

¹² Menocal suggests (p. 87) that, had the Tunisians been better "close readers" of Lull's lyric poetry, had they been more attuned to his ironic and tolerant deconstructive vision, then they would not have stoned him to death: "As intolerance bred intolerance, inevitably, the ugliness of the Almohads and the Almoravids, each in turn potentially only a dark lapse, became permanent. Again, Lull serves as the best poetic image, history's own poem. He was stoned to death in Tunis for preaching not just conversion but a union and re-union of opposites that no one could understand anymore." Let me here point out, incidentally, that, though indeed stoned and attacked on various occasions in Tunis for publicly proclaiming Christianity's preeminence (and though frequently writing of his desire to die a martyr, so "the last thing I taste may be blood flowing from my body" [*Book of Contemplation*, 129, 29; cited in J.N. Hillgarth, *Ramon Lull and Lullism in Fourteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 33]), Lull was never stoned to death there: he lived to the ripe old age of 84 and died of unknown causes. For a concise account of Lull's life, see Bomer (*op. cit.*), pp. 3-52.

to others. The hope is that the poet's Ironic vision or impossibly difficult discourse will permeate the real political world to some extent, lessening fanaticism and extremism, leading toward a political order that is relatively tolerant of multicultural diversity. Or, as Menocal says:

When the world all around is calling for clear distinctions, loyalties to Self and hatred of others, and, most of all, belief in the public and legal discourses of single languages and single states—smooth narratives—what greater threat exists than that voice which rejects such easy orthodoxies with their readily understood rhetoric and urges, instead, the most difficult readings, those that embrace the painfully impossible in the human heart? (89)

Again, this is a critical manifesto that might well have been endorsed by both Cleanth Brooks in 1940 and by Paul de Man in 1980: the critic's task is to show, through the display of "difficult readings," the untenability of simple either/or assertions about human affairs. And it is now fairly obvious to see why deconstruction became so easily and almost wildly embraced in American intellectual circles (much more so than in European ones, where Derrida is just another satellite and not, as he has been here, the center of the solar system): deconstruction, like the New Criticism before it, attributes to good literature the promotion of the very bedrock founding value of liberal American democracy, tolerance for diverse and opposing points of view. Deconstruction, the praise of plural assertions, the celebration of more than one meaning in one and the same text, is perfectly consonant with the dominant ideology of a nation, sometimes called the Union (meaning a unit made of differences), whose motto is *e pluribus unum*.

REVIEW

Ronald E. Surtz. *Writing Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain: The Mothers of Saint Teresa of Avila*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995. ISBN 0-8122-3292-5.

This well-documented and eminently readable book is a welcome addition to the literature on Hispanic women writers. It fills a void in this field, namely the Castilian religious women writers who immediately preceded Saint Teresa of Avila, or, as the author calls them, the "mothers" of Saint Teresa of Avila. Her "daughters" already have been studied in detail by Electa Arenal and Stacey Schilau in their well-known anthology, *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in their own Works*. Surtz's book complements this anthology by providing a great deal of information about five Castilian nuns who preceded Saint Teresa of Avila: Teresa de Cartagena, Constanza de Castilla, Maria de Ajofrín, María de Santo Domingo and Juana de la Cruz.

Teresa de Cartagena, the most famous of the five, belonged to a distinguished family of *converso* writers. These included, among others, her grandfather, Pablo de Santamaría, who was first Chief Rabbi of Burgos and then Bishop of the same city, and her father, Pedro de Cartagena, an important member of the Burgos municipal council. Thus, she grew up in a very intellectual and powerful family. However, she was deaf, which appears to have prompted her family to place her in a convent. Teresa seems to have resented this marginalization, and she spoke in favor of the rights of the handicapped in her first work, *Arboleda de los enfermos*, a treatise on illness. The latter was so sophisticated that people said a woman could not have written it. In response to this criticism, she wrote her second treatise, *Admiración Operum Dey*, a defense of women's right to write. These two works have been studied by the critics in some detail. Surtz offers his own interpretation, a close reading of the texts which reveals how Teresa, through her choice of images, particularly that of Judith, presents herself as an exception to a rule she truly does not question: that women are inherently weak, and men are naturally strong.

The relatively little-known writer, Constanza de Castilla, was the legitimate granddaughter of the assassinated king Pedro I, being the daughter of his son Juan. Another legitimate granddaughter of Pedro I, Catalina de Lancaster, married the usurper-king Enrique II's grandson, Enrique III, and was