

REVIEW ARTICLE

"Supple Like Water:" Lyric and Diaspora

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Maria Rosa Menocal, *Shards of Love: Exile and the Origins of Lyric*.
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*I would have coined a song
like a spear
piercing the trees, the stones, the sky
a song
supple like water
untamable
as bewildered
as conquest*

—Adonis, Mihyar of Damascus

I. The Desert

What was it like to live in ages when the power of poetry could pierce stones, while flowing supple like water, elusive, ineffable? Maria Rosa Menocal's unabashedly gutsy book takes the readers back to the lyric origins of a good deal of Western history—Columbus's voyage of dis-

covery, for openers, that began on August 2, 1492, the same day, some say, that the Jews were expelled from Spain. It proposes a philosophy of history that is also a philosophy of lyric poetry.

Indeed, one suspects that the whole thrust of the book, its genesis as well as its passion, arises from Menocal's sardonic conviction that modernity's substitution of prose for the power of poetry is of a piece with modernism's belief in technology as progress and periodization as a necessary segmentation of history. This book takes enormous risks without even seeming to be aware of steaming full-bore through minefields of every sort. *Shards of Love* unwinds and weaves its skeins coolly just a hair's breadth above, but sometimes on the knife-edge of contradiction.

Aggressively contemporary in attitude, the book positively invites characterization as a reprise of a certain romantic celebration of popular language, of "the poetry of the people" that motivated nineteenth-century concepts of medieval poetry, and a whole school of medievalizing imitation. Like the romantics, Menocal believes that passion, gut feelings, run deep and raw in true song. She does not hesitate to say that "... the wounds of the fractured self [are], in crucial ways, the hallmark of the lyric and its often pained and lonely voice" (174). She believes in a lyric that does not so much bridge the mind/body dichotomy as to implode it. She also takes as a matter of course that distinctions of high and low culture simply perpetuate a kind of exile on lyric poetry. For the poetry of high culture, beginning with Petrarch, was a poetry of fear, lyric exiled from its roots in natural language, from the change and variation of popular song. The poetry of high culture in this scenario bespeaks fear of change, fear of discontinuities, fear of contamination, fear ultimately, of anonymity.

To construe *Shards of Love* as in any sense conservative, as pleading for a return to some golden age of lyric, would be to mistake grossly every syllable of its plea. On at least two counts. First, any notion, all notions of golden ages, of nostalgia for the past, belong to the history of periodization, to that prosaic history responsible for the putative "death of lyric," or at least for its cultural subordination. Secondly, she emphasizes the extent to which lyric is viscerally part of those moments of great social transition and change. It is not so much historiography as memory, as personal history lived and suffered and sung in vernaculars, by observers usually out of tune with the grand schemes, the new narratives sweeping across their world.

Solipsism, isolation, exile are hallmarks of lyric: not because singers are the lonely wanderers portrayed by Romanticism, but because his-

tory is a collective enterprise, whereas lyric arises from personal memory, personal loss, individual subjectivity seeking reintegration with an altered world, a world that has no place for a fractured self. So Menocal does not postulate nor still less mourn for a period when poetry defined a world—the view espoused by many philologists who celebrated the origins and power of medieval poetry.

Subscribing in part to a Vichean concept of historical cycles—Vico, like Dante, and their modern interpreters, e.g., Auerbach, Spitzer, Edward Said, inhabit this work in important ways—she matter-of-factly perceives periods of intense lyric activity as transitory. It is not the lyric that is destroyed, but the conditions that shape its poets. There is a difference, however, between the conditions for the poetry of the Middle Ages and that of later times. Medieval civilization could not manage so efficiently as later periods to install and police boundaries of high culture—indeed, there is not a lot of evidence that it wanted to do so. *Shards of Love* argues powerfully that the conditions for true lyric poetry, the lyric of the solipsistic self seeking to express and ultimately heal through music the fragmented memories of a lost moment, a lost world, these conditions abound unseen all around us. Unseen, because consigned to a cultural exile, overlooked under the convenient category of low culture. Cultural exile, it turns out, is not knowing how to hear, how to appreciate the love song. It is that discovery, and the ability to write it for all to see in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*—not the *Commedia*, most emphatically *not* the *Commedia*—that enabled Dante to emerge from the desert of his exile, at least the metaphorical part of it, the exile of the mind. It is on the edge of the same desert that Menocal situates Dante's companions of the lyrical diaspora: Ibn 'Arabi, Ramon Llull, Eric Clapton, Erich Auerbach. The book begins in August 1492 on the edge of the sea, in Spain, at the beginning of exile, and it ends on the edge of the desert, in an indeterminate time, both earlier and later than the beginning, a time one could describe as the real time of poetic genesis, where poets try to write themselves out of exile. The ones we hear about succeed.

Desire in Menocal's account drives both moments:

Desire is the struggle to not always look behind, at what is gone, at what will be gone. But desire is memory, the memory of first love, gone. Desire is poetry, the first language, stark and pained, coming out from the desert. Desire is imagining you have really left that first love, that old language, back out there, more or less buried in the desert, to be scorched by the desert sun, perhaps it will leave some traces, some sun-whitened bones, but not

many. And you, you can start all over again, you can write the story from the beginning. (186)

II. Lyric and Memory

Menocal is neither faint of heart nor finger-food for the fastidious: she lays out most of her precepts with the gusto of Martin Luther hammering his ninety-five theses to the doors of All Saints in Wittenberg, at the feast of All Souls, 1517. And one of her principal precepts is that historiography (and history) function very much like lyric poetry, or, rather, with analogous strategies. Another, equally audacious precept insists on the survival of a certain strain of medieval lyric in classical rock. Or even bruits rock and the troubadour lyric as asymmetrical doppelgänger.

This filiation seems less puzzling once one grasps her connection between history and lyric, both of which must be uncoupled from a rationalizing hermeneutics, the exegetical counterpart of an historical master narrative. Menocal does this in the first of the two major sections of *Shards* that she calls "The Horse Latitudes" from a poem by the rock star Jim Morrison.¹ Morrison, like Eric Clapton, mixed cultural references in a phenomenon that has become known, in a slightly different connotation, as "cross-over." "Cross-over" is very much what Menocal's book is about both in content and style.

Her title, "The Horse Latitudes" comes from a poem of the same name by, not the troubled rock singer Jim Morrison, but his alter-ego and would-be serious poet, James Douglas Morrison—the name he used when he wrote "serious" poetry, and that, for Menocal, is part of the tragic irony of his art and his death in Paris. A key line from "The Horse Latitudes" runs "True sailing is dead." "True sailing" turns out to do serious work for Menocal, metaphorically speaking. For "true sailing" refers not only most obviously to Columbus, but more crucially to the historical watershed his "sailing" has come to represent. "Sailing" also assumes metaphysical implications, attitudes towards the world, approaches to history, even demonstrating ethical dimensions—for this is a moral book, in many ways—of the pejorative expression, "sailing close to the wind."

The first section of the book uses the metaphor to show how Columbus's voyage of discovery to the New World became a line of demarcation between the Middle Ages and modernity. It was no simple matter of periodization that underlay the brusque differentiation between

pre-expulsion and post-expulsion Spain. A new conception of what "Spanish" meant motivated the master narratives of history and literature, and, ominously, the "official" narrative of Columbus's voyage, driving them so far astray in the horse latitudes, as never to let them get back on course.

How? mostly it's "the vision thing." Quite literally in this case, Menocal argues, for the expulsion of the Jews on the "same day" as his own sailing seems to have gone unremarked in Columbus's log, his gaze presumably turned westward, far out to sea. And the gaze of history has followed suit seeing what "Columbus," the mythical construct of the "medieval man" in a "new world" he could not inhabit chose to see. Or chose *not* to see; that's Menocal's point about the horse latitudes. In the course, not of the sailing itself, but in its historiographical replays presented by the voyage chronicles over the last five centuries—most emphatically *not* excluding our own—some important cultural components went by the board, jettisoned when the ships sailing to the new world were becalmed in the horse latitudes, figuratively speaking.

"Columbus" here becomes a touchstone for a seachange in historical perspective. "Modern" attitudes perceived as beginning with the discovery of the Americas look far less progressive, culturally speaking, than medieval values identified by Menocal as postmodern. The Spain of the period prior to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, she argues, sheltered a vibrantly pluralistic society in which different religions and races did not so much co-exist, as truly interact in a devastatingly brilliant cultural matrix.² In the idyll of medieval Spain, Arabic and Jewish culture, assimilated and steered by political figures, who were also intellectuals, like Alfonso the Wise, and intellectuals who also influenced politics, like Ramon Llull, along with a host of known and anonymous poets created a truly mestizo climate of science, arts, and letters whose influence changed the face of Europe. This was a world where identity politics had yet to poison the tree of knowledge. The Other was much like the self, or so it would appear from literary remains. No one claims that life was easy, only that intellectual tolerance and exchange somehow happened. "True sailing," culturally speaking, was possible.³

And, it turns out in Menocal's narrative, that "yare" or true sailor, Christopher Columbus, did carry this tolerance for cultural melding to the new world. At least at the beginning, Columbus signified in his person the multicultural, polyglot, and "polygenetic" imprint of medieval Spain. For there are at least two Columbus's in *Shards*. There's the "official" one produced, Menocal shows, by a Reconquista narra-

tive dating back to Columbus's own time that typified the mindset of certain Spaniards in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries who wanted a Spain that was racially and culturally pure, "really" Spanish. They were the ones responsible for expelling the Jews and denying the Arabic foundations of pre-fourteenth century Spain. "Their" Columbus was preternaturally pious, wrote (through the narrator of his first trip, Bartolomé de las Casas)—and thus by inference *spoke*—an amazingly pure Castilian, and expressed gratitude and unwavering fidelity to Ferdinand and Isabella.

Then there was the other Columbus, the more plausible master mariner, Genoese by birth, pan-Mediterranean by virtue of his calling, in fine, the "medieval" man whom Menocal seeks to recuperate for the authentic Spanish Middle Ages. That is the period referred to as the golden age of al-Andalus, which was also the golden age of the Sephardim. Menocal defines "medieval" as:

the Middle Ages the Reconquista was battling. The Reconquista, as the ideological construct that pits itself against al-Andalus, is not only *not* medieval, it is as *anti*-medieval as they come (43).

The truly "medieval" Columbus, then, is the polyglot Jewish *converso*, so accustomed to a Mediterranean world peopled with Moslem races that he shipped a Jewish interpreter fluent in Arabic—the lingua franca of the civilized world—with him on the voyage so as to be able to converse fluently with the inhabitants when they reached the Indies (11). Columbus was not disappointed, in a way, for the first diplomatic exchange to occur in the New World—a meeting Menocal describes as a "bit of great and fitting lyricism left out of most of our narrations"—took place somewhat surreally in Cuba between Columbus's Jewish interpreter of Arabic, Luis de Torres, and a Taíno chief. Luis de Torres spoke in Arabic. And the Taíno chief?

One could hardly find a more telling, because insignificant in a sense, index of the untrammelled cultural variety of the "medieval" Mediterranean that had formed Columbus. Menocal undertakes to describe its Spanish manifestation "resonating in 1492 and its children in the New World":

Here [in "medieval" Spain], 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. Here, literature struggles and dances around with all manner of cultural alternatives, sometimes in difficult conflict. To know that the first major writer of Latin America, the Inca Garcilaso, is a half-breed—Inca mother, Spanish father—who writes in the pa-

ternal tongue in order to save the mother's history—until then oral—is to know and to hear again hundreds of details of the universe of the *muwashshahat*, where the scattered and vulgar songs of Christian girls are saved, made into written texts, because they marry the Poets, that male classical Arabic tradition that has written History. This, however, is a History that has carved Memory itself, the lover's love song, into its heart. (45-6)

It is only by uncovering, by re-remembering all of this that one can appreciate the full poignancy, the real achievement of Columbus's voyage. What he discovered, and what he brought to the New World, in Menocal's revisionist account, was the possibility of recreating in the New World the lyric culture of al-Andalus, the siren song by which al-Andalus had charmed Europe in a gesture of cultural colonization embraced by the troubadours in Provence, Frederick II in Sicily, half-recognized by Dante, and then, driven by fears of heresy, threats of domination of one sort or another, progressively denied.

The principles of that lyric beat were particularly apposite to what would become the mestizo and Creole cultures of the New World. Menocal does not stop to enumerate these vernacular principles, but we can readily recognize them as the "cross-over" pulses at work whenever the vernacular spawns new art forms, be it a Provençal canso, a negro spiritual, jazz, blues, rap, or rock. They are: improvisation, variation, assimilation, and above all, vocal rhythm—that is, song based on the voice speaking not one, but two or more languages: strange languages, exotic languages, other languages.

The paradox of the Horse Latitudes in Menocal's work is profound: the New World authorized the imposition of identity politics on the Old, fracturing a centuries-old tradition of open cultural accommodation whose fruits had created the learning—and though Menocal doesn't say it—the narratives of *navigaciones* or sea voyages of exploration that made Columbus's enterprise conceivable. From her perspective, medieval Spain—al-Andalus in Arabic, Sefarad in Hebrew (was any other European country called by its inhabitants by so many names in languages that qualify as "local"?)—is clearly the most culturally and demographically varied of lands. It was a model for what the New World had the potential to be, but could only become slowly, painfully. Indeed, medieval Spain appears as a beacon for the multicultural aspirations of the American 1990's. Of course. This book was originally planned to appear in 1992 as part of the Columbus celebration. Cancer intervened, delaying the planned book, and shaping a very different one, with a graver, profounder sense of the value of life, and with a very different sense of the nature of lyric. It's in the

conjunction of lyric and life, or lyric's searing sense of the fragility of life, that Menocal situates the metaphysics of lyric that shapes the main thrust of the book, or at least its longest section. Here one finds a theory of lyric to ponder.

III. Lyric and Presence

Paradox and scandal—the latter serving as the section title—map lyric's generic code in *Shards*. Paradox, particularly, makes the link between the formal conditions of lyric and the poet's fate. Lyric, in this work, openly courts social pathology, traversing, when not actively trading, social convention, a point cued by "Scandal," the title.

First of all, the lyrical subject, the singer, composes in exile, far removed from the social matrix—and the vernacular language—the song celebrates. Negation of the conditions of normal social life—flight, repudiation, dispossession, isolation, everything short of downright destruction are the conditions of song. Trauma, certainly, but also, possibly, a kind of destruction of the soul. And yet, lyric turns out to affirm life, rather than to chronicle or celebrate its destruction. Lyric possesses the power of presence, an ontological affirmation of that which has been lost, almost a rebirth.

Song implies a picture of its subject; it pictures the pleasure of the desire to sing its subject as both the troubadour Folquet de Marselha (13th c) and one of the illuminated manuscripts that presents him to us knew perfectly well.⁴ On one folio of a North Italian manuscript, we find a double representation, in poetry and painting, of a love song composed to a lost lady (*domna*). Song, writing, and painting—the latter showing the woman's face imprinted on the poet's breast just where the song says he carries her image—all underscore the presence of the lyric woman, of the poet's desire to sing the absent being.⁵

En chantan m'auen a menbrer
 Cho qu'eu cug chantan oblidar.
 Mas per'cho chan qu'oblides la dolor
 E'l mal d'amor.
 Et on plus chan plus m'en souen
 C'a la bocha nulla res no m'aues
 Mas tan merce.
 Per qu'es uertax et çembla be.
 Qu'ins el cor port domna uostra faichon
 Qu'em casita qu'eu no uir ma razon.

[Singing obliges me to remember what I thought I could forget by singing. And that's why I sing: so that I might forget the pain and heartsick. Yet the more I sing, the more I remember, for nothing comes to my mouth but "mercy." And that's truth and it seems right. For in my heart, Lady, I carry your likeness. Let him chastise me for not turning away my being from you.⁶

The "shards" of love are precisely those pieces of a broken life from which lyric reconstructs a new state of being, a presence for the poet. This presence balances on the fulcrum of desire, the epicenter of reality for the poet: "The artist paints his desire, paints himself desiring, torn apart, happy to be torn. He paints the desire to paint inasmuch as this desire is the subject to be painted . . . As if painting were something like desire: less desirable than desiring (and as such infinitely heartbreaking—and desirable)."⁷

"Scandal" also recalls the paradox that the love lyric, a quasi universal phenomenon in which people of all kinds and from all times recognize one another (and themselves), nonetheless inhabits a profoundly solipsistic social space. Double exile, in fact, once from home and the human ties that define the social for us, and again from the self, from the bonds of rationality that mark us as social beings, . . . or sociophobes. Why does madness so often define great love? Why must the passionate artist suffer alienation? One explanation lies in the irreconcilable differences between the contingency of physical love and the artist's need to affirm a desire beyond contingency. Much of the mystery of lyric lies there. For the rock love lyric as well as for its medieval avatars in *Shards*.

Menocal recalls how Eric Clapton discovers, then bonds with the Arabic poet Nizami's romance, *Layla and Majnun*, a classic of the medieval love canon—with affinities to the romance of *Tristan et Iseut*—written in 1188. Like Nizami's lover-poet, Majnun, Clapton was in love with a woman who seemed unattainable, Patti Boyd Harrison, then married to his best friend, George Harrison, another musician . . . and much more famous than Clapton at the time. Or at least until, haunted by Nizami's narrative and spurred by passion, Clapton composed and recorded his signature lyric, *Layla*. Clapton performs—literally, plays, at least in the 1970 version of *Layla*—the role of the poet Majnun, exiled to the desert by his hopeless desire for Layla. Hopeless, finally, by no external impediment, for she ultimately seeks him in his desert exile. Their love remains inaccessible to both of them in the end because of Majnun's inability to recognize in the woman, the desire, or the desired object, of his songs. Majnun's, and ultimately Layla's tragedy lay in the impenetrable solipsism of the poet's desire to sing.

Although Provençal *vidas* pretend to locate the genesis of a love song in a troubadour's sentimental biography—just as, in a witty, infinitely more sophisticated pastiche of the convention, Menocal does for Eric Clapton and *Layla*—there is no "real" woman there, or only anecdotally. *The* or *a* woman must exist, or must have existed, for she signifies the poet's commitment to desire: the desire to love, the desire to write, all cathected onto the image of woman, of *the* desired other. In effect, the personified lyric object, the *domna*, recalls a mythic feminine, or the memory of a mythic female presence. If she can be said to have a referent, it must be the reference of the voice, a catachresis for the body, that is, the body's ability to perceive and make meaning through the senses. The *domna*, then, signals lyric's commitment to aisthesis, to perception through the senses, and through sensual perception to affirming the body's central role in art, and, ultimately, life. More cogently, aisthesis accepts the challenge of contingency, whose locus and sign is, precisely, the body.⁸

Layla, or Patti Boyd Harrison, or Iseut are a catachresis for desire, but *not* the desire to possess. ". . . the strongly antisocial ethos of the solipsism of the lyric is nakedly displayed [by Nizami] and Majnun is difficult to cast in a heroic or sympathetic role" (147). With good reason, for the affirmation of the lyric is not the affirmation of comedy, but the paradoxical affirmation of being in its more concentrated distillation. The same call to being may be prelude to tragedy, or to any narrative solely focused on resolving the problems posed by love. What it tells us is that the poet is always engaged in a struggle with the complex historical circumstances of being, and of memory—often much the same thing in lyric.

Kinship across the contingent gulf of history, be it the short *durée* or the long, perhaps best describes the affirming presence, Menocal locates in the lyric. Impatient of the literary historical particularization imposed on the medieval lyric by historicism, she seeks to move lyric from period specificity (one of the reasons for the contemporary eclipse of poetry) into an arena where the work poetry can achieve for an individual's self-understanding can become more evident. That means at once familiarizing the estranged medieval artifact, confined within the reliquary of high culture, by repositioning it in terms of a contemporary vernacular. This movement, then, accompanies a reciprocal defamiliarization of rock which she predicates in terms where its intellectual value may be understood.

Menocal assigns the movement of affirmation and recovery done by the lyric as much to the reader as to the work itself. She asks that the reader take the poets on their own terms, at least initially, and that we

"indulge the poets and their texts and that we believe—at least as long as we are reading the poem—in the impossibilities they are urging on us" (86). One way to do this, she suggests, is not to read in a historicist manner, simply seeking to establish priorities, but rather to read disparate lyrics together, comparatively, as a narrative of affirmation showing how poets as different as Ramon Llull and Ibn 'Arabi (or Dante) responded to what Walter Benjamin called the storms of history. In a willed contravention of linear literary history, this project of comparative reading moves confidently across history, while at the same time emphatically embracing the complex historical circumstances against which the poet was forced to struggle.

For the contradiction inherent in the poetry, its affirming thrust to presence, is born of that struggle. Menocal's quarrel is not with historical fact, still less with the contingency of history—"Sometimes memory is contingency" (87)—but with an historicizing exegesis of medieval poetry that would efface what she eloquently terms that "best poetic image, history's own poem."

Again, Llull 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. Ibn 'Arabi, no less, is drenched in such contradictions, bred in the old capitals of multiculturalism that themselves had bred, perhaps inevitably, a cultural relativism which, like Llull's pacifism and Ibn 'Arabi's pantheism, would soon be seen as madness. (87)

By linking medieval love lyric and contemporary rock in their social and historical contexts, portrayed here as compellingly reciprocal despite their wildly different historical venues, *Shards* uncovers another paradox of lyric: the tension between form and performance, a tension almost as irreconcilable as that between desire and love. Lyric *qua* song exists, finally, only as performance, a point Menocal makes eloquently. Or rather, lyric begins in a love affair with language—spoken language, vernacular language—a love affair that can finally be appreciated in the presence of the voice that combines words, music, and evocative sexuality conveyed by the body.

... we appreciate far too little the enormity of the step taken when the vernaculars usurp the rightful place of the languages of power, thus usurping—if the coup succeeds—some measure of that same great power... In turn, the at times delirious triumph of success... is perhaps most evident in the near-worship of language itself that is so strikingly the object of desire and love that it is readily confused with some kind of lover. (131-32)

And yet, the love lyric becomes possible as performance because of its idiosyncratic, but definite form. No form, no lyric. Indeed, we talk about the love lyric much of the time either in terms of its formal properties—what's left after performance—or in terms of the proposition it conveys. Lyric requires formalist discourse because of the ineffability of its affect and its ideas, or at least their sense. Unlike the novel or romance, lyric cannot be discussed separately from matters of form—language, rhyme, rhythm, figures, stanzas—however contingent and remote from the performative persona of the lyric these might be. Contingency, then, marks not only the subject of the love lyric, but its modes of presentation as well.

Form constitutes, indeed organizes the historical "life" of the work, its status as artifact, preserving all but the embodied performative elements. By the very success of the vernacular in carving out a space for itself on a cultural stage previously reserved for the "classical," vernacular lyric comes to share the power of its predecessor cultural forms. That is the moment when the lyric form of the vernacular begins to lose its freedom to improvise, its freedom to shape itself to the rhythms of live performance. At this moment, medieval lyric begins to transform itself into a written lyric, into a form whose performative space is the manuscript matrix where "voice" becomes a metaphor.

We can actually witness this transition in the margins of manuscripts that fall relatively early in the process. Where a manuscript might follow a performative tangent giving a version of a lyric different from what one finds in other manuscripts, a correcting hand, only slightly later than that of the scribe's, writes the more common form—canonical!—in the margin.⁹ Writing thereby works to reinforce hieratic principles. It also encourages efforts to discover and fix texts as well as meaning, giving rise to the whole hermeneutic enterprise.

Exegesis needs formalism as a structural anchor in the text to secure its lines of interpretation to the contextual orthodoxy that inevitably motivates hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, then, reconciles the "mystical and hermetic"—Maria Menocal's preferred terms for lyric's singularity—with orthodox doctrines. Inevitably, external forces, religious or political (often both), fuel exegetical efforts to bring poetic works into doctrinal conformity. This is done classically by transforming lyric into narrative. "Retelling a sonnet makes it not a sonnet any more," as she notes, but it does allow commentary to smooth dangerous ambiguities. So, for example, commentaries on the *Song of Songs* in the Middle Ages routinely subsumed its frank sexuality in terms of a narrative of spiritual allegory. But a subtle reader of the *Song of Song's* mystical cel-

celebration of the mythic entwining of religion and sexuality like Marie de France (12th century), could produce a commentary on the *Song* that was not a narrative retelling to explain away its unsettling celebration of love, but a companion piece in the vernacular, updating the Biblical version and reinforcing its evocation of sensuality, the natural world, and lyric communion between the sexes.¹⁰ Marie de France understood the multiple parameters of the love of language and the language of love. She also grasped the need for a lyric form, in her case stretching the limits of lyric while maintaining the link to song, in order to protect as well as present her innovative (and unsettling) brand of thinking through and with the body, in short, of aisthesis.

We learn from such reflections that formalism can abet the violence done to lyric, when placed at the service of interpreters anxious to make lyric "intelligible" within a given framework of belief. But formalism can also serve as lyric's carapace protecting it from exegetical invasiveness.¹¹ In the hands of a reader willing to accept lyric's link to mysticism on its own terms, the form of the lyric leads one to appreciate its great beauty.

IV. Myth and Lyric

Mysticism as a motivating force of lyric points to hidden springs, precisely those elements that allow it to engage being, to demonstrate fundamental aspects of life—what it means to desire, to need, to think, to love, to write, to wonder. This anamnesis or uncovering tells us what is ineffable in lyric, how it can seize the senses, convey things that strike us as just "right" without seeming to deal solely or even initially with the mind. Lyric somehow brings mind and body together, privileging neither, which is, of course, the complaint most frequently lodged against it.

Mysticism inevitably leads us back to lyric's older sibling, not to say its crucial other, myth, without which, like form, it is impossible. Maria Menocal does not specifically address myth, but she intimates its presence, and, indeed, her treatment of Christopher Columbus might well serve as an example of second-order myth. By way of conclusion, I want to suggest some of the links between myth and lyric that will help to situate the work of lyric recuperation Menocal undertakes in this sinewy book.

She may not have chosen to deal directly with myth for the reasons that make her comments on lyric's power of affirmation so compelling. When she places the origin of lyric at the edge of the meta-

physical desert, gives it the task of writing one's way out of exile, she evokes the bright side of a silent dialectic. The shadowy partner, the underworld of lyric, is myth. Myth also evokes an emotional world, a negative world, raw where lyric is polished, brutal where lyric is suave. Myth deals not with love, but lust, not with communion, but betrayal, not with life, but death. Fate rules myth, not compassion, and fate is rarely kind, always impersonal.

Betrayal structures interpersonal exchanges in myth be it between hero and heroine, gods and human, or both. Intention rarely signifies, certainly not in any positive sense, for in a world ruled by impersonal fate, consequences are rarely intended. Myth structures instances of violation, betrayal, and violent death against a backdrop of a nature always in motion and frequently hostile. "A mythical event can mean a change of landscape," notes Roberto Calasso, meaning that myth routinely structures forced movement from one place to another, as in an abduction, for example.¹² As though to demonstrate that being *is* exile, that the world is fundamentally hostile, myth structures a landscape where disaster, betrayal, death, or metamorphosis constantly transform innocent pastimes like picnicking, bathing, or hunting into scenarios of abduction, entrapment, violation.

Calasso remarks that mythic heroes are slayers of monsters: Apollo, first, then Cadmus, Perseus, Bellerophon, Heracles, Jason, Theseus. Mythic women also have a heroic gesture, derived not from a god as in the case of the men, but from a priestess: Io. Just as Io betrayed her goddess, Juno, the heroic gesture of women in myth is betrayal, generally the betrayal necessary to permit the hero to slay his monster. Both gestures entail devastating consequences on their actors, though, paradoxically, their societies may flourish thanks to their transgressive benefaction.

The hero incurs the pollution of the monster, as Tristan, for example, is poisoned by the tongue of the dragon he slays in Ireland. But it is in the enabling gesture of betrayal by the heroine that one discovers, Calasso argues, a civilizing purpose behind this cycle of negation:

The effects of woman's betrayal are more subtle and less immediate perhaps, but equally devastating. Helen provokes a war that wipes out the entire race of heroes, ushering in a completely new age, when the heroes will merely be remembered in verse. And, as a civilizing gesture, woman's betrayal is no less effective than man's monster slaying. The monster is an enemy beaten in a dual; in her betrayal, the traitor suppresses her own roots, detaching her life from its natural context. Ariadne is the ruin of Crete, where she was born; Antiope dies fighting the Amazons, her own subjects

who were faithfully rallying to her aid; Helen leads the heroes she loved to their downfall . . . Like a spiral, woman's betrayal twists around on itself, forever rejecting that which is given. It is not the negation that comes into play in the frontal and mortal collision of forces but the negation that amounts to a gradual breaking away from ourselves, opposition to ourselves, effacement of ourselves, in a game that may exalt or destroy and which generally both exalts and destroys.¹³

Exile again, This time the real desert. And here we see the hook to Maria Menocal's philosophy of lyric, for Calasso reveals the monster in the monster-slayer, the self-destruction (and exaltation) that led Majnun into the desert, and helps explain why the world of love is born in the destruction wreaked by the passionate complicity of hero and heroine: "And with the heroes a new world of love is disclosed."¹⁴

With Vichean logic Calasso's constructs myth as the struggle by ambiguous precursors whom we both admire, for taming the natural world that causes much anxiety, and fear because they half resemble the monsters that they slay to make civilization possible for us. As a precursor to lyric, mythic poetry makes the world comprehensible by rendering it as historical narrative, but a problematic narrative where the resolution of a natural evil—the slaying of a monster—can never *not* substitute a social problem for the society supposedly helped. So when Tristan slays the dragon that terrorizes Ireland, thereby winning the right to woo Iseut for his uncle, King Mark, his passion for Iseut and their adultery, a moral and political taboo, transforms an impersonal danger into a pressing social threat to Mark's kingdom. Paradoxically, the transition from the natural and supernatural menace of monsters to that of social problems, like adultery and royal succession, marks a civilizing progress. It is in the subjective, social world where the love celebrated by lyric can function.

Myth thus serves as the "prehistory" of a lyric culture, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say as its "memory" to avoid the implication of a necessary historical sequencing. For, as the example of Tristan reminds us, the mythic world evoked by the Tristan legend, occurred almost simultaneously with the beginning of the Golden Age of lyric in Languedoc and al-Andalus. Indeed, myth and lyric in this sense are phases of the same process, though they present differently.

Myth assumes a narrative discursive mode while affecting an impersonal perspective ostensibly rooted in the far past preoccupied with narratives linked to law, religion, rule, set against a backdrop of the natural world. The love lyric on the other hand retains its association with the body, particularly sound or voice and emotional states, to the

point where generic terms for the love song derive from such analogies: "lyric" (which conflates music, voice, instruments), song and sonnet (from *son*, "sound, music"), verse (from *vers*), "rock" (from the motion of the singer's body), ditty, *dît*, *ditié* (from *dire* "to speak, say, recite"), lay (from *Lai* "song"), and so on. The love lyric speaks in the present, in the first person, and in the vernacular, the language that conveys unconsciously the full gamut of raw emotion. That is the real meaning of the mother tongue, as Leo Spitzer noted in his anecdote about the Alsatian obstetrician who only began to prepare for the delivery of a baby when the mother's cries switched from French to Alsatian.

Through a discursive mode adapted to staging the presence of the speaking subject, thereby conveying the imminent reality of a real being, the love lyric personalizes the impersonal mythic scenario. It reduces the scale of events down to the immediate, emotionally engaging. At once we can understand how someone can take the risks of love, the risks of betrayal, of exile, of madness so incomprehensible when portrayed on the mythic or epic scale. This is the opposite of Aristotelian catharsis. Catharsis supposes an ethics of distance, of adverse example: we cannot suffer like Oedipus because we cannot *belike* him, and a good thing too. The love lyric makes the reverse move: it engulfs us, forcing us to perform the poem as we become the lyric "I". Our own participation opens the emotional world of the poem to us, making it both possible, bearable, and frightening at once. Lyric does not "domesticate" passion, far from it. Nor does it dissipate the anguish.

If myth reveals the horror of passion, human and divine, in its obsessive, repetitive violence, lyric transforms this negation into a civilizing force not less painful, but somehow infinitely exciting. It celebrates sexuality by showing the tensions between desire and love, and by stressing their ambivalent, even contradictory goals and objects. At times poetry seems to represent love and the love object, but more consistently seems to embody desire, forking back on itself and its performer. Forking back on the poet's desire, in short, or on our desire to be the poet when we sing/perform the lyric. Love lyric is constant in its inconstancy, always adulterous, infinitely promiscuous. Therein lies its social pathology, therein its pain.

In *Shards of Love*, Maria Rosa Menocal permits readers to discover once more the love lyric as a vital cultural force, as both a product of and window on multicultural and multiethnic discourse. She shows us a love lyric that gives a whole new meaning to Columbus's voyage, and

to the discovery of a new world. That "Columbus" might become the name of a rock group consisting of Eric Clapton on guitar and vocal, Dante on bass, Ramon Llull on synthesizer, Ibn 'Arabi on drums, and with lyrics by Majnun, is only one fantasy that comes to mind by way of illustrating the profound rethinking of historical and cultural norms urged so trenchantly by Maria Menocal.

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NOTES

- 1 The book contains four asymmetrical sections whose construction tells us a good deal about the kind of book it is. "The Horse Latitudes" and "Scandal" do the major work; "Desire" is a coda by way of exiting the book properly speaking. Finally, Menocal writes a long, informative essay entitled "Readings and Sources" which discusses the works that would ordinarily be cited in footnotes.
- 2 Menocal eschews conventional reference apparatus in favor of a lively bibliographic essay. The essay-form permits her to offer a detailed report on her interaction with the sources underlying her book which are amazingly varied. In the "Readings and Sources" section dealing with the pluralistic society of the Golden Age of al-Andalus, she stresses the parallel and the synchronicity between that culture and the rise of the troubadours in Languedoc. Following historians of the Kabbalah for whom the Albigensian movement plays a significant role, Menocal includes the kabbalists in the cultural pluralism that so richly endowed the twelfth century on both sides of the Pyrenees. "... this peak moment of Andalusian culture is paralleled in the culture of *languedoc*... the flourishing of the kabbalistic movement in Provence coincides with the Golden Age [of the troubadours]. The years 1150-1220 are given in the seminal work on the subject by Gershom Scholem, with the kabbalists moving elsewhere at the time that the Albigenses, along with many troubadours, fled from *languedoc*. Most of the kabbalists escaped to what remained of Sefarad, where the Golden Age of Jewish culture was still very much being felt. Indeed, *that* Golden Age, primarily in al-Andalus and practiced by the rabbinical class, also reached its peak during this period; the three major poets were all contemporaries or slightly younger than William of Aquitaine. For obvious reasons, the decline of this age corresponded to that of the rest of pluralistic al-Andalus; thus, it was very much on the way out in that same first quarter of the thirteenth century." (*Shards*, 217-18)
- 3 "Identity politics" injected themselves into European politics initially via the Crusades; the fall of Jerusalem to Saladin (1137-1193) in the late twelfth century sowed a climate of anxiety in Europe itself, a sentiment rendered more acute by the perception of religious heterodoxy and the decisive move by the Church to repress it, with the assistance of civil authorities early in the thirteenth century. When the Church established the Holy Office of the Inquisition to respond to the Cathar "heresy," intolerance and orthodoxy—always a fertile matrix nourishing identity politics—became firmly entrenched. Menocal shows that Ramon Llull, one of her prime exhibits for the pluralistic Golden Age of al-Andalus, was subject to attack from ecclesiastical enforcers of orthodoxy. Llull had, she shows, an "extensive knowledge of Arab authors," and was "as Arabized as any highly educated Muslim." (220-21) Llull's struggles with the "orthodox Church, struggles in which he was passionately and determinedly engaged throughout the last part of his long life" demonstrate, for Menocal, "the thorough extent to which he was suspected of heretical tendencies and the extent to which a previous era's general conditions of tolerance were rapidly degenerating during his lifetime." (221)
- 4 "By all appearances, painting... represents poetry. Poetry thereby represents itself and art in general—by the detour of a poetic representation of painting that is itself a pictorial representation of poetry. "To paint" is a common metaphor—actually, a catachresis—for "to represent" in general, in language, in music, and so on. Painting is the catachresis of all the arts, inasmuch as it is their task to represent." "Laughter, Presence," Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993): 385.
- 5 The song appears in Provençal Chansonier N, now in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, MS. Morgan 819, folios 59b-d. The painting appears in the margin to the right of column b on f. 59.

- 6 I translate *ma rason* as "my being," in the sense of the poetic life, the center of the poet's being. *Razon* means of course, "reason," in the senses of "reason for" as well as "reasoning," but *razo(n)* also serves as a frequent double for "uida" or poetic life—the short biographies accompanying troubadour poems in manuscripts beginning in the 13th century. In this meaning, it connotes "the rationale for (poetic) life, the *raison d'être*." All of these ideas resonate in Folquet's defiant refusal to let go of the desire to sing and to point to the image of the woman in his song.
- 7 Jean-Luc Nancy, "Laughter, Presence" in *The Birth to Presence*, p. 380.
- 8 Plato, ever skeptical as to the value of aisthesis, caricatures the aesthetic mode cruelly in *Phaedrus* via the myth of the cicadas. The didactic myth, by which Plato conveys philosophical puzzles, if not their solutions, here seeks to demonstrate the absurdity of trying to locate in the body a means for thinking rationally about the contingency of the body. Sensual perception, aisthesis, cannot resolve the problem of how to escape the embodied human condition because, aisthesis, like aesthetics, can only dramatize both the pleasure of the body, and the desire to escape its contingency. Recognizing or expressing the desire to escape embodied contingency, and actually attaining that desire, are very different things. Plato conveys what he sees as the circularity of the aesthetic mode in this respect via his parable of the cicadas. These were originally a race of musicians, of singers so desirous of making music, and so enraptured by musical aesthetics, that they neglected to nourish the material side of their bodies. They ultimately died of starvation and were changed into music-making insects with a life-span of a single day, entirely devoted to making music. Aisthesis, Plato suggests, blinds rational thought, overriding the material requirements of life with an unhealthy emphasis on aesthetic "effects," tantamount in Plato to pure illusion. For a discussion of the myth in general, and the problem of embodied contingency it raises, see G. R. F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's "Phaedrus"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), particularly pp. 150-67.
- 9 Chansonnier N, MS Morgan 819 in New York offers a striking example of how writing acts as a canonizing agent in the representation of certain poets. The section of Morgan 819 devoted to the poetry of Bernart de Ventadorn, then as now one of the two or three most popular of the early troubadours, inserts marginal "corrections" where the later hand feels the MS version strays into idiosyncrasy. The marginal "corrections" offer alternate readings of words, lines, or in some cases, adds entire stanzas "omitted" from the original manuscript version. Morgan 819 dates from c. 1280, while the correcting hand appears to represent a 14th century script, perhaps some fifty years later. The fact that some poets are so treated and not others provides, in itself, an important historical record allowing us to say just when certain poets came to be considered "classics" and their texts therefore more or less fixed in a canonical form. By the same token, the presence of these "corrections" suggests an intolerance of variation, or perhaps a growing sense that a lyric has a fixed form. That attitude certainly manifests itself, Menocal tells us, in reactions to Eric Clapton's revisionist "unplugged" version of *Layla* dating from 1993 (p. 165).
- 10 The *Song of Songs* explicitly codes into Marie's first *lai*, a form which she invents or adapts for the purpose of celebrating the rites of love and the woman's right to choose in matters of the heart and family. *Guigemar*, her "model" lay, first invokes the tutelage of *Song of Songs*, but its presence permeates other key lays of Marie. See my article, "Solomon's Bed, Virgil's Bacchanalia, and Marie's Riotous Writing," forthcoming.
- 11 For an exposition of formalism as a means of showing how literary works can mediate social controversy—as opposed to making literary texts conform to contextual orthodoxies—see two recent articles by Frances Ferguson. "Canons, Poetics, and Social Value: Jeremy Bentham and How to Do Things with People," *MLN*, 110

- (1995):1148-1164; and "Pornography: The Theory" in *Critical Inquiry* 21 (Spring 1995):670-695.
- 12 Roberto Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, Translated from the Italian by Tim Parks (New York: Vintage Books, 1994): 64.
- 13 *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*: 69-70.
- 14 *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*: 70.