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Book Reviews

María Rosa Menocal. *Shards of Love: Exile and the Origins of the Lyric*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994. pp. xv+295.

Shards of Love is a spectacular book, a shattering, breathtaking, impossible book—a book that any serious scholar dealing with the Middle (Near) East needs to face up to, for reasons I will touch upon later. Impossible, as the object of the usual kind of review; irresistibly impossible for the reviewer, because it is in the end impossible to avoid the certainty that its shattering will be somewhere, sometimes experienced as a rebellious vandalizing of precious vessels of unity, origin, grand narrative, textual authenticity . . . and that it will be elsewhere and for much the same reasons a bursting of bonds, a breaching of walls, and the first breath of a new air that takes your breath away.

Shards is a story of stories, of the making of memory and the politics of forgetting. It transgresses everywhere, across boundaries of time, language, culture, discipline, specialization. And in its transgressions it demonstrates over and again that Nietzschean "strong philology," embracing the contingency of "truth" and "reason," pragmatism, rejection of foundationalisms, idealisms, historicisms, positivisms, far from signaling the demise of all that is pure and right, is the promise of brilliant insights into the loveliness and power of things too long kept in the dark.

We live in a scholarly universe ordered and segmented, for purposes of control perhaps, on the belief that the shards of memory, when the measure of each has been exhaustively taken by methodological tools of proper devising, will reassemble into the true narrative that will be the ground and proof of its own exegesis. And in this universe María Rosa Menocal is an incisive, erudite vandal, a force, Breaker of the Vessels, to conjure, quite appropriately, Harold

Bloom and the Kabbalah. She is, to borrow her own words, one of the very bad children who amount to a great deal that Yale, to its vast credit, has nurtured in their badness, which term I use in both its usual and more colloquial senses. She has a chair, the R. Selden Rose Chair of Spanish and Portuguese, from which she tears at the walls that engender chairs of Spanish and Portuguese and separate Spanish and Portuguese from Arabic and Italian and Turkish and Hebrew, that separate al-Andalus from Provence and Istanbul, from Spain and Portugal and France, that separate the troubadours of the *languedoc*/Provençal from Arabic lyricists and today's rockers. She is, herself, an exile from fields and departments of this or that, exiled to a kind of comparative literature or comparative philology that is tenaciously vital if yet to be fully born.

Our common narrative of origins, the story of the classical (Greek/Roman) birth and later re-birth of Western Civilization and the pure, grammatical national languages is a palimpsest, the Petrarchan over-writing and occultation of an ungrammatical, vulgar, lyrical, heterogeneous history/memory. This memory is named "medieval," the in-between, the dark, occluded age. Its mode of memorializing is a lyrical, unorthodox history, lyrical in its fragmentedness, intimacy, synchronicity, the lyrical, medieval that, when it shows up today, is called "post-modern." The story of this "medieval-ness," which steps quite easily and paradoxically into the newest of the new, emerges in the retelling of al-Andalus, and the troubadours and *muwashshaḥāt* and Dante's exilic *De vulgari eloquentia*. *Shards* is itself a giant stride that takes off from tale of memory developed in two previous books: *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987) and *Writing in Dante's Cult of Truth* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). It is a lyrical telling of this memory's origin, although not without the occasional, not-quite-hidden urge to chill bloody-minded moldy figs with a blast of erudition. It is also a telling that often and effectively embraces the language of art—for how indeed can one capture the lyric in the exegetical language of scholarship or capture any of it at all except in another lyric.

But there is a theme here in the magnificent metaphoric moments of *Shards*: the much memorialized originary voyage of 1492 and the simultaneous, usually ignored, and vastly more numerous

voyages of tragic ending; the scraping clean of al-Andalus/Sefarad as preparation for inscribing the history of Spain and Spanish and the national narrative; and Columbus' translator, Luis de Torres "chatting up" the Taino in Arabic—naturally, because anywhere in all the known world there is always someone who speaks Arabic; and the mystical lyrics of Ibn 'Arabī and the loves of the Christian mystic, Arabist Ramon Llull; the Cathars/Albigenses and Kabbalists; and Salman Rushdie and his eponym Ibn Rushd, Jim Morrison and Ezra Pound and Judah Halevi and Eric Clapton . . .

[*I sit far from any university with* Shards *on my lap and a young person stops in the act of passing to look at my book. "Ah," she says, "Layla . . ." Amazing! I don't even know how she knows, so she explains. And we talk of Layla and Majnūn, Niẓāmī of Ganja and the Arabs and Persians and Ottomans, love and the lyric and rock music . . . an extraordinary conversation with a mutual interest usually found only among fellow specialists: we each learn something, touching—more than some graduate seminars—on the things that move me to passion in my work.*]

When we pull back from a timorous faith in a science that can encompass any shard and all shards and tell their story in one smooth narrative, we may just come to the realization that it is all about the imaginative construction of memory in a contest to see what words our children will use to sing what songs. It is about Erich Auerbach, exiled in Istanbul, creating the story of Romance philology as an antidote to nationalism gone mad; a lyrical (medieval!) philology rooted in desire, without distance, without totalizing, without pretense to a self-deluded objectivity.

[*Intimate engagement . . . Menocal even tells the story of her sources, not in a barren list but in another stunning essay. And I should say—to locate myself—that she includes some flattering words for this reviewer. Love it or despise it you will know where you stand amid the ebb and flow of critical theory after you have read* Shards. *And, I must add, it has already been the center of the most satisfying graduate seminar on Middle Eastern literature and literary theory I have ever taught.*]

So how is a book that on the surface seems aimed at expanding the horizons and recreating the metaphors and vision of Romance philology a crucial book for Middle/Near East specialists and even for non-specialists or exiles from specialization? The short answer goes something like this: the Middle East is itself an exile from the

story of "world literature/culture," a story in which China is far more often and more easily told than Turkey or Persia. Scholarship on the Middle East has labored long and diligently to write a smooth narrative of national languages, authentic texts, epic roots, "classical" origins lost in a very long, dark "medieval" interim and recovered only recently in the belated renaissance of nationalist modernity. Sadly, this deformed cousin of Europe's Petrarchan tale has, in fact, failed to bring to the Middle East recognition of kinship within the world literature family. Instead, much of Middle Eastern literature has been consigned to a rather musty attic along with other family shames and skeletons such as the so-called "medieval". And how often is traditional Middle Eastern culture called "medieval" as a label connoting the dark, cruel, unimaginative, unoriginal? But if the "medieval" is not merely a transcended moment on the time-line of progress, if it represents one period of a synchronic oscillation: orthodoxy/heresy, original/variant, classical/vulgar, unity/fragmentation, national/multicultural, grammatical/ungrammatical, modern/postmodern... then there is context in which the literature of the Middle East itself is crucial to the story we could be telling of all literature.

María Menocal has opened the doors to the ghetto a large bit wider for us, especially, perhaps, for those of us interested in telling the stories of post-Tīmūrid and pre-modern literature and she suggests as well a theoretical framework for our emergence; if only we have the ability, which I don't doubt exists here and there, and also have the nerve to understand what she is saying, to make a huge conceptual leap toward the creation of an alternative memory of the Middle East, which I, sadly, doubt we shall do even as I eagerly hope we will. We shall see...

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