

Beginnings

MARIA ROSA MENOCAL

Genesis and chronicles

At the beginnings of literary histories lie the most alluring questions. We want to know all about what we call the origins of the tradition whose story is about to be told. Few start with "once upon a time" and yet nearly all are tempted down that road marked "sources" or "birth" or "genesis," even when we know that it is a path that, nearly by definition, can have nothing like an unambiguous endpoint or resolution. Why do we persist in our scholarly tradition's most quixotic quest, the search for that grail, that moment of birth, that earliest text or, as it is often called, "monument"? Why do we persist, even when we know (for we ourselves teach this) that what does survive from the earliest sources, in relatively remote times, may be largely a trick of history, and may bear only an accidental relationship to what there really was? Why do we not begin, more simply and cleanly, in some indisputable *medias res* and from there go bravely forward into the future, rather than backwards to where the question of the source of that particular river may lie? Why are we most insistent of all, when writing about those periods often charmingly called by poetic names (such as the "springtime" of our literature), on the need to clarify what we call "influences" – and what can that mean other than the poetic company that poets kept? Why are the histories of medieval literatures (whether free-standing or, as here, as the origins stories of later literatures) so consistently our versions of the story of Adam and Eve, sometimes down to and including quasi-biblical titles such as "the creation of literature in Spanish"? Also down to and including the interpolated different accounts? Why do we lapse into our own versions of fundamentalism, even when these stories are transparently mythical, when we ourselves are at times the priests who explain the iconic – rather than historic – importance of these "where do we come from" stories?

At play is that compelling human need to establish beginnings – which means in part to establish causes and meanings – and it is why most individuals, as well as traditions, struggle mightily with competing origins stories (so that even within the Book of Genesis two story traditions about the Creation have survived alongside each other). Yet we never seriously

think about abandoning the quest for the most satisfactory account of our beginnings. "A beginning: this is the source of the fascination medieval literature exercises on the mind . . . A beginning that is not really a beginning: this is the source of the complexity and originality of medieval literature," is how the senior historian of the Middle Ages in France puts it in the introduction to his own history of French medieval literature.¹ Implicit in Zink's provocative résumé of the particular interest of medieval literature is the recognition that most beginnings do not spring from any true void but rather from the destruction of something that went before. In Genesis itself the beginning of mankind, as we know it, is predicated on the destruction of that first period of innocence in the Garden of Eden.

In the beginning was . . . well, just what was there at the beginning? Was it the word, the text, the manuscript, the story, the song? What was its language? What languages did it replace? Who were the singers of those songs and the tellers of those tales? Saying just what we believe constitutes the beginning of a literary tradition – its new languages and its half-new forms – is what the philologist was created to do, and his task is really working out the etymology of a whole culture. Because both language and literature are what we take to be the vivid external markers of the most intimate qualities of communities, the stories of where they come from are of more than passing or academic interest and likely, instead, to be widely perceived as revealing the soul of a people. First there is, indeed, the word; and from the words come the songs sung with them, delighting in them; and then those stories, and then the stories about the stories, and so on. These are always difficult puzzles to piece together and often the literary historian is working from a series of fragments, and attempting to create a picture – to write a genesis story – that sheds light on much later literary phenomena. Difficult as any of this might be, however, it is still easy enough to argue that no creation story among those of the modern nations of Europe is more vexed than the one this book attempts to retell, that of Spain.

Spain's history stands out conspicuously in the annals of Western Europe and its culture, because of the singular fact that, beginning in the eighth century, it was incorporated into the expansive Islamic Empire whose center was, in that initial period, in Damascus. The far western province of a civilization that on its eastern frontier reached nearly to China, al-Andalus (as it was called in Arabic, the *lingua franca* of the Empire), was not, however, destined to remain a primitive outpost or a poor cousin of the brilliant Islamic world. In 750 a bloody coup

¹ Michel Zink, *Medieval French Literature: An Introduction*. Trans. Jeff Rider (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1995), pp. 1–2.

overturned everything: while staying at their family estate at Rusafa, some 250 miles to the northeast of Damascus, the Caliph and most of his family were executed. In one bloody moment were thus eliminated the Umayyads, who had ruled the *Dar al-Islam*, the "House of Islam," since 661, and had presided over the staggering expansions of that century. The Abbasids, their rivals who engineered the dramatic rupture in the leadership, both religious and civil, of the vast Islamic polity, moved their capital to Baghdad, and there and then began a new chapter in Islamic history. This was not only an end but also the dramatic beginning of a distinctive new western history of Islam and Arabic-based culture. In this story that begins in the Near East lies the striking new foundation for medieval Spain: it turned out that one of the Umayyads had miraculously escaped the slaughter of his family. The young and intrepid Abd al-Rahman spent five years making his way to the far western provinces because that was the land of his Berber mother, and he correctly assumed he would find loyal men there. By 756 the last of the Damascus Umayyads had established himself in the colonial capital of Cordoba (and even built a new Rusafa on the outskirts of the city) and, as the first of the Andalusian Umayyads, he began the project of material transformation that would make this permanent exile of his a place worthy to eventually declare itself, as it would in the middle of the tenth century, the true caliphate.²

This, then, is the genesis of a transformed world order, and from this point forward the languages and cultures of Spain are markedly different from those of the rest of Europe, which is overwhelmingly Latin and Christian – and by and large still in that state of cultural dimness that had been the rule in Visigothic Spain as well. The contrast will mean that for the next four centuries or so Spain (the new Spain that is so dramatically transformed, even down to its topography and botany, with dozens of plants from the Old World soon thriving in the New) will be markedly the more civilized place, and the source of both material and intellectual innovations for the rest of Europe. Latin and its regional spoken variants survived, as did Christianity, but in virtually every respect – including the forms of Latin spoken and of Christianity practiced in the peninsula – the universe was changed.³ The question of how to write the history of this transformation, and its many complex consequences over the next seven centuries (at least), is the toughest of historiographic problems. Many, perhaps most, of the accounts of the history of Spain after this dramatic break directly or indirectly portray the consequences as a Spain thereafter divided between, on the one hand, the true "Spaniards"

² See D. F. Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscape, and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain* (State Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), on the transformation of the Iberian landscape under Umayyad rule.

³ See Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World* (New York: Little, Brown, 2002).

(the descendants of the Latin-speaking Christians from before the invasion of 711) and, on the other hand, the Muslim invaders who, along with the Jews (a community that in fact flourished under the Umayyads and for centuries thereafter), were a foreign and "oriental" culture. The political and demographic facts, however, as well as the cultural landscape as it evolved over some seven centuries (it is worth stating explicitly that this is as long a period as that covered by the entire literary history of the years *after* 1492: from 1492 until our own times), suggest that this simple dichotomy does little justice to the complexity of the situation and its dozens of variations over such a vast expanse of time and space.

While this is not the place to attempt any detailed retelling of that history that spans some seven centuries and at least as many languages (three classical written languages, Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew, as well as a number of distinct vernaculars, one based on Arabic and the others on Latin), it is crucial, at this beginning at least, to dismiss the most conspicuous distortions of the vision that posits that we can simply put aside, as somehow foreign to the true Spain and true Spaniards, the languages and cultures and literatures that first arrive with the Umayyads and that undergo a dozen different adaptations and flowerings and declines over those many centuries and under many different kinds of cultural circumstances. The broadest vision of what Spain was – and was not – in the Middle Ages deserves better than to remain the implausible caricature all too often accepted by those working on the literature of later periods, who are likely to see the medieval past as little more than the primitive stages of what will eventually become the real thing.

Crucially, it must be established that Arabic was from the outset, and for several centuries thereafter, the language of a book-loving and poetry-rich culture that was not remotely restricted to Muslims, but ultimately shared by most cultured Spaniards, including Jews and Christians. By the eleventh century, medieval Spain was also the place where Arabophone Jews re-invented poetry in Hebrew, and, beyond that, this was an easily multilingual society, a civilization whose aesthetic hallmarks were in creative intermarriages and adaptations and translations of all sorts. The untidy truth is that medieval Spain was home to a greater variety of interrelated religions and cultures, as well as more languages and literatures, than seem plausible or convenient to attribute, as origins, to the literature of a single modern national literature. If unified nations and single national languages are the benchmarks for the divisions of literatures established in the modern period, then the medieval universe which precedes it cannot be fit into those same parameters and divisions, without distorting the past to make it seem as if its only lasting value was in laying the groundwork for a distant and ultimately unimaginable future.

What is Spanish, before there is Spanish?

What was Spain, in the beginning? Or, more appropriately, what is the beginning of the Spain whose literary history this is? The grave difficulty for the medieval period is determining just what it is that we can legitimately call "Spanish" before any language of the peninsula is remotely understood as the unifying language of a modern nation, a time during which a remarkable range of both vernaculars and classical languages were in use and, tellingly, during which there thrived in the peninsula the most vigorous culture of translation in European history. A time and place, in other words, about as far as possible from the monolingual (and monoreligious) national culture of "Spanish" whose pre-history we presume this is. It has long been understood, in fact, that *español* was originally a trans-Pyrenean word, and that well into the Middle Ages the inhabitants of the peninsula identified themselves by their religion, or by the cities or regions they inhabited – Leon or Navarra, Toledo or Seville. Moreover, linguists understand clearly that even to conflate *castellano* with *español* – i.e. leaving aside the problem of the non-Romance languages – is a problematic procedure.

Even if we do not conflate these terms, and instead limit our canon *geographically*, to what was written in that place that is occupied by the modern nation of Spain (which comes into viable existence in the configuration we know not in the Middle Ages but, instead, in 1492), then how do we deal with the many literatures in the many languages that populate the peninsula before *that* relatively clear beginning, a beginning based in some measure on the destruction of that same long past that had included both Jews and Muslims, and their languages and literatures? If it is the language that determines filiation, then the lack of "Spanish" in the medieval period – and in fact the abundance of other languages, and the supreme literary and belletristic importance of languages that are linguistically unrelated to Spanish – presents a logical problem; and if it is the place that determines whether the literature belongs to the larger history then why do we, indeed, not count the vigorous and culturally central literatures in those other languages?

These are the toughest questions, then: what can we plausibly deem "Spanish" and "Spain" to be in the medieval period, and thus what is properly the literary tradition that lies behind that watershed year of 1492, that decisive year when both the modern state and its language were consolidated and codified? Self-evidently these are not questions that exist in isolation. Quite the contrary: they are subsections and offshoots of the largest historical questions about Spanish history and about Spanish "identity." In these most iconic realms, language and literature, these questions and especially their answers carry special weight. The matter

of how we deal with these multilingual and multi-religious complexities that bear so little relationship to what follows – that one could argue is what the modern nation-state was built to deny and to destroy – is extraordinarily thorny. Perhaps the only reasonable answer is one that no modern literary history is likely to propose: to declare that what lies before that moment when Spain so dramatically turns its back on its own past and sets about disavowing it and destroying its icons (the pyres of burning Arabic books in Granada are an apt symbol of a far more widespread and deeply destructive phenomenon) is so different in its essentials, and so complex in its differences, that it no more belongs in the same literary history as what follows it than does the Latin literature written by Roman citizens born in the province of Hispania, during the "silver" years of the Roman Empire.

Of course, not including the Romans of Hispania is also a judgment call, and a matter of the cultural visions and customs of the moment at which the history is being written. The long-canonical work of José Amador de los Ríos, for example, *Historia crítica de la literatura española* ("Critical History of Spanish Literature"), fearlessly begins with the Romans from the earliest moments of their recorded writings in the peninsula, continues with the Christians of the Roman world, and after the Fall of Rome includes the Visigoths. This trajectory leads to Isidore and from there to the popular Latin poetry of the last years before the Islamic conquest. The first volume of Amador de los Ríos in fact ends with the legendary materials concerning Rodrigo and the last of the Visigoths and, without skipping a beat, or ignoring the overwhelming shift in power and social structures and religions that follow, continues with the "escritores cristianos del Califato" ("Christian writers of the Caliphate"). One might quarrel with the ideology that underpins this trajectory, which establishes that the Spaniards are defined first by geography and secondarily by conversion to Christianity, and then, ultimately, by remaining Christian in the aftermath of the Islamic invasion and colonization (which in fact led to wholesale conversions to Islam). It has, however, the merit of defining the complex terms forcefully – it is not simply geography nor a single language, but a clear identity unembarrassedly defined – and then drawing a line of descent and development consistent with those terms.

At the outset of the twenty-first century Amador de los Ríos' nineteenth-century vision, when laid out so explicitly, might seem quaint and unsustainable in a number of ways, and yet it is little different in practice from the default position developed over the course of the twentieth century, and nearly universally accepted. Our more recent versions, however, are less straightforward, since some scholars might, indeed, be embarrassed to admit that they would define medieval Spaniards as really Spaniards – or not – according to their religion. The less direct rationalization for the continuation of the same divisions used by Amador de los Ríos

(if it is Castilian – or a linguistically related dialect – it counts) is that this is the linguistic first step in what will develop into the national language. This position sets the standard for inclusion within the orbit of “Spanish literature” *avant la lettre* (i.e. before 1492 and throughout the medieval period) by saying that it is the linguistic relationship to the language that will eventually become the language of the nation that makes it count or not. This now-canonical vision of the literary history of Spain subsumes a number of dubious principles: that literary history is developmental, so earlier stages are those that lead to later stages; that the literary history of a people in a given period can legitimately be defined by the extent to which their literature is composed in the linguistic harbinger of what will become, some 400 years later, the language of the nation that will succeed and replace those people and their cultures; and that the literatures in other languages, even though they may have been vibrant and indeed central in the earlier period, may be ignored altogether or, at best, studied insofar as they may have constituted “influences” on what is then understood to be the “real thing,” i.e. what would one day become important. One need only begin to imagine applying these principles to other historical circumstances – or, perhaps, to imagine what its application might mean 400 years from now when scholars will be writing the literary history of our own times, based on whatever might by then have become the literature of the dominant culture of North America – to begin to understand the gross distortions of cultural history this creates and then reinforces. Beginnings, in this vision, matter only if they lead to certain ends, and this is a treacherous path indeed for the literary historian to follow.

The very widely used literary history of Juan Luis Alborg may be taken as exemplary although it is in fact superior to many (and in that comparable to Amador de los Ríos) in its direct exploration of the prickliest questions.⁴ Alborg begins by raising the question of whether it is a matter of the language itself that can determine which of the premodern literatures of the peninsula belongs in a literary history of modern Spain. He does eventually answer that it is, indeed, a linguistic choice, and that *literatura española* is *literatura castellana*, and that the only historical conundrum is the question of the true first instances of Castilian literature. He does not do this, however, until he has conceded that there were a whole series of other languages that might be considered as players in that same literary history: Latin (both classical and medieval, and the versions of these used by the Visigoths and their putative descendants the Mozarabs) as well as *judia* (*sic*) and *árabe*. For Alborg, though, the decisive factor is ultimately, as a result of that same anachronism of working from

⁴ Juan Luis Alborg, *Historia de la literatura española* (2nd edn. Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1970).

back to front, what he describes as being “su repercusión en el *posterior* proceso cultural español” (“its repercussion in the *later* Spanish cultural process”;⁵ emphasis added), and yet even this formula suggests greater cultural or historical nuance than is really the case here. Alborg and, with him, and after him, an overwhelming majority of scholars (not to speak of the curricula of the majority of Spanish programs) simply rest the case with a direct equation of “castellano” with “español.” The two other Romance dialects that were major players in the medieval cultural scene, Catalan and Galician, are, nowadays, allowed secondary roles, in part as a reaction to the rise of the regionalisms in Spain. Yet Arabic and Hebrew, and their extensive literatures, are disqualified, because those languages did not “become” Spanish – and, presumably, because their speakers and writers, and their descendants, did not become Spaniards.

By working backwards (as if the past had serving the present as its principal function) and furthermore by using linguistic criteria without cultural context (or to disguise rather simple cultural-religious prejudices), the commonplace vision of the origins of the literature of Spain has as its own beginning the dismissal of hundreds of years and many libraries’ worth of writing by Spaniards, that is, Spaniards who were not Christians – in an era in which Christianity was not at all a passport to citizenship – and who wrote in languages other than Castilian – in a very long era in which Castilian was, at best, one of many legitimate languages, at worst non-existent in the world of culture and literature. Through much of the period Castilian had little or no literature and it was eventually established in great measure through a massive project of translation from Arabic. It may continue to appeal to some to tell the origins story of modern Spain focusing on the tale of how the Castilians worked their way up the literary ladder of medieval Spain, and it serves certain purposes central to the project of creating the modern (i.e. post-1492) Spanish identity. Nevertheless, it egregiously misrepresents the culture of the medieval period, which (much like our own) imagined that its importance was within its own time, and on its own terms.

What is medieval?

The truth is that a new approach to the medieval literary history of Spain – which may or may not then be regarded as the true origins of the rest of Spanish literary history – already exists. A viable model and starting point was created in the mid twentieth century: the conspicuous and exceptionally useful exception to that general practice of excluding all but

⁵ Alborg, *Historia*, p. 12.

what looks like what will become Castilian is the multi-volume *Historia general de las literaturas hispánicas* ("General History of Hispanic Literatures"), published in 1949 under the general editorship of Guillermo Díaz-Plaja. The adjective "Hispanic" has been adopted (and adapted) to include *both* of those historical possibilities that make the Spanish case so different, and so much richer, than any other among the modern European national languages: the full range of literatures written by communities living in the peninsula before there was Spanish *and* literatures written in Spanish, regardless of location. That Latin-American literature is thus included as part of this history is hardly revolutionary, although perhaps in the middle of the twentieth century it would have seemed far more audacious than it does today. Still, the first of the six volumes, which has the expected and formulaic "In the beginning" title ("Desde los orígenes hasta 1400" ["From the Origins to 1400"]), is in fact anything but the expected. Instead, it is a radically unconventional depiction of those origins, and the parameters of the study are defined quite directly by Díaz-Plaja in his preface when he says that this book is "una obra en que se intenta captar cuantos valores estéticos ha producido el genio literario albergado en los confines históricos y geográficos que se conocen o que se han conocido alguna vez bajo el nombre de España" ("a work in which we try to capture whatever aesthetic values have been produced by literary genius located in the historical and geographical confines that are known, or that have at some point been known, as Spain").⁶

The first of the essays in Díaz-Plaja's volume (following a long general preface by Ramón Menéndez Pidal) takes us back to the seemingly arcane and even eccentric posture of Amador de los Ríos, beginning at the absolute beginnings of any knowable literature from the Iberian peninsula, i.e. with the literature written in Latin during the Roman period. (This literature formed a substantial part of the canon of the "Silver Age" of Latin-Roman letters, including as it does the younger Seneca, Lucan, Martial, and Quintilian.) The second of the chapters also suggests it will follow that much earlier pattern, focused as it is on the "literatura latinocristiana" ("Latin-Christian literature"), a chapter that includes the writers (not many, to be sure) of Visigothic Spain and culminates in the great Isidore of Seville, whose lifetime dovetails almost uncannily with that of the prophet Muhammad. During the sixty or so years they lived (the prophet's years are known more precisely, 570–632, and Isidore's years are generally given as c. 560–634), their universes were as different from each other – and as unimaginable and unknowable to each other – as can be conceived. Within a century of their deaths these starkly different

⁶ Guillermo Díaz-Plaja, *Historia general de las literaturas hispánicas* (Barcelona: Editorial Borna, 1949), p. ix.

planets would in fact collide, that new order created by the prophet from the Arabian desert replacing and remaking the struggling old order that Isidore had valiantly attempted to keep alive. Therein lies the great challenge to writing a history of the literature of the peninsula: how do we deal with the radical transformations of the old Hispania of Isidore and his ancestors? What follows from that revolution that today would no doubt be cast as a "clash of civilizations"?

Díaz-Plaja's mid twentieth-century functional answers to these and a host of comparably difficult questions are exceptional. The structure of this first volume of the larger history recognizes the pivotal position of Isidore and the complexity and legitimacy of the heterogeneous heritage he represents, and to this the first sections are devoted. Isidore's ancestors were those who, first, shared his language, Latin, and later, and in only a partial continuum with the "HispanoRoman" ancestors (which was a linguistic kinship but a cultural and religious divide), those who shared his religion and its culture, Christianity, but who, unlike the citizens of Rome, had only the most rudimentary appreciation of anything like literature. In that sense, and in others as well, this is not only the first stage but indeed one of the crucial foundations of the medieval chapter – and the classical Latin heritage that stands behind that was important even as a shadow, as a lost standard that made men like Isidore nearly despair of their own times and cultural conditions (and that may have contributed to the attraction of the book-crazed Arabophone world, to which so many Christians would convert). Díaz-Plaja understood that this early medieval Christian culture would encompass the advent of Islam in the peninsula, as well as the flourishing of the Jewish communities and the spectacular renaissance in Hebrew letters that is one of the results of Muslim rule and universal access to Arabic letters. This history openly rejects the widespread conceit that the "Spanish" culture that Isidore represents – and the Latin foundation that lies as a haunting shadow behind that culture – went into isolation until it could re-emerge, fundamentally unscathed, centuries later. It openly maintains that the legitimate trajectory of the literary cultures of Spain must include those that developed in the peninsula that were not Christian and not Castilian or proto-Castilian – those that perhaps did not "lead" to Spanish in the reductive ways we are given to understand the concept of "leading to."

So it is that in this history the complexity of the mid eighth-century transformations get something like their due credit. The bearers of the new faith – which as it happened was radically logocentric and already had a distinctive and revered poetic tradition – were in the very first instance a band of conquering foreigners, a handful of Syrian Arabs and the majority rank-and-file Berbers from just across the Straits of Gibraltar. Within a generation, and in a steeply increasing curve thereafter, and for

several centuries after that, the Muslims of this newly named place, al-Andalus, were overwhelmingly converts from all of the older ethnic and religious groups of Isidore's time, and they intermarried with the newer arrivals. "Así pues no se puede dar con propiedad el nombre de 'árabes' a los españoles, sino el de 'españoles musulmanes'" ("So we cannot with any propriety call the Spaniards 'Arabs,' but rather 'Muslim Spaniards'") is the pithy and refreshingly lucid statement on the subject by Elías Terés, author of the central chapter of this section, on "La literatura arábigoespañola" ("Arabic-Spanish Literature").⁷ This means, among many other things, that the fantasy elaborated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, that Christians were of a different race from Muslims (and Jews, of course), and thus always of a different language and culture along with their different blood, is delusional in various ways.

In the first instance, as Terés points out (and as most historians have known for some time), most of those Muslims participating in the extensive and rich Arabic literary culture that was the hallmark of Andalusian culture for many centuries were the descendants of converts and of intermarriages. Even beyond that, what we also know is that, with the exception of a radicalized minority, even those who remained Christians became, like the Jews, members of the multilingual community of medieval Spain, which means that even if we were explicitly to restrict the original "Spanishness" as an identity admitting to only one religion, Arabic literary culture would, even then, need to play a central role in the medieval Spanish canon. The famous lament of Paul Alvarus of Cordoba, the outspoken mid ninth-century opponent of the Arabization of the Christians, paints a vivid enough picture of the integration of Christians into the Arabophone community, which included both Muslims and Jews:

The Christians love to read the poems and romances of the Arabs; they study the Arab theologians and philosophers, not to refute them but to form a correct and elegant Arabic. Where is the layman who now reads the Latin commentaries on the Holy Scriptures, or who studies the Gospels, prophets or apostles? Alas! All talented young Christians read and study with enthusiasm the Arab books; they gather immense libraries at great expense; they despise the Christian literature as unworthy of attention. They have forgotten their own language. For every one who can write a letter in Latin to a friend, there are a thousand who can express themselves in Arabic with elegance, and write better poems in this language than the Arabs themselves.⁸

⁷ Elías Terés, "La literatura arábigoespañola." In *Historia general de las literaturas hispánicas*. Ed. Guillermo Díaz-Plaja (Barcelona: Editorial Vergara, 1949-1968), vol. 1, p. 219.

⁸ Jerrilyn Dodds, *Architecture and Ideology in Early Medieval Spain* (State Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1990), p. 67.

Like Amador de los Ríos, Díaz-Plaja includes a chapter on the culture of these Arabized Christians but the context could not be more different, following as it does both a chapter on "Literatura hebraicoespañola" (written by the then-dean of that field, Millás Vallicrosa) and, centrally, the comprehensive piece on the nearly seven centuries of literature in "arábigoespañol" by Elías Terés.

This vision of Spain in the Middle Ages, both implicit and occasionally explicit in this volume, thus provides a rather different point of departure than the one most literary histories offer, where a rough-and-tumble frontier people in the eleventh century begin the long process of creating a new literature from scratch, singing about their warrior heroes in a language that knows no written form, and which can only lay the essentially primitive (even if sometimes moving) groundwork for what will one day achieve true poetic status, roughly around the time that Castilian is well on the way to being the only form of Spanish literary culture. Here, instead, it begins with a community for which, already in the eighth century, Arabic had long been the language first and foremost of immensely sophisticated poetry (as well as of all the other belletristic forms, including philosophy and the sciences). As Terés puts it: "Siendo objeto de universal cultivo por parte de los árabes, la poesía irrumpió en España en el momento mismo de la invasión. Según una noticia – *que parece falsa pero aún en su falsedad es simbólica* – ya Táriq el conquistador cantó en verso su paso del Estrecho" ("Being the object of general cultivation by the Arabs, poetry burst into Spain at the same time as the invasion. According to one report – *which seems to be false, although in its falseness it is still symbolic* – the conqueror Tariq already sang in verse his ride over the Straits [of Gibraltar]").⁹

Even if this attribution to the conqueror of a first poem for this new beginning in Spain is apocryphal (and thus all the more telling, as Terés perceptively notes), there is a historically better documented first poem from later in that same eighth century. This different beginning for the brand-new Andalusian culture is one written by the man who, a generation later than the conqueror, is readily identifiable as its truer founding father, Abd al-Rahman. He was a first-generation immigrant in exile in what was, when he arrived, the outer province of al-Andalus. At the same time he can legitimately be understood as the first poet of the brave new world he himself would craft, transforming that outland into a new center, a homeland for the not-quite-exterminated Umayyads, and for their expansive cultural vision of Islam. Abd al-Rahman himself is a symbol of the productive fusions of that civilization, himself the child of an ethnically mixed marriage, as well as the scion of a dynasty that had promiscuously

⁹ Terés, "La literatura arábigoespañola," p. 233. Emphasis added.

taken and reshaped so much from the cultures it had encountered during its previous century of vast expansion. In a literary history of Spain creative or audacious enough to define the radical reconfigurations of the eighth century as the legitimate beginnings of a crucial chapter in that history, Abd al-Rahman's famous ode to a palm tree could stand as an iconic first monument of Spanish literature:

A palm tree stands in the middle of Rusafa,
Born in the West, far from the land of palms.
I said to it: How like me you are, far away and in exile,
In long separation from family and friends.
You have sprung from soil in which you are a stranger;
And I, like you, am far from home.¹⁰

This linguistically, religiously, and culturally complex picture of pre-fifteenth-century Spain is eventually continued with a chapter by Menéndez Pidal on the so-called "School of Translators" and then, and only then, moves on to a section on "España romance, siglos XII–XIV" ("Ballad in Spain, 12th–14th centuries"), which now self-evidently follows in a variety of complex ways – accepting or rejecting, as often as not some of both – from everything that has preceded it. The architecture of Díaz-Plaja's volume, and the ideology that lies behind it, suggest a number of principles about Spanish literature *avant la lettre* that may seem, today, self-evident and valuable, and yet very few of them have shaped literary histories in the more than half-century since that ambitious work was published. This is a picture of a Spain which, before the establishment of Castilian as the national language (and with it Christianity as the unique national religion, and presumably with a correspondingly orthodox literary culture), was not really that later Spain at all, but rather one radically different from it, at least as different as the long-vanished Roman past, which is rarely adduced as the "origins" of Spanish literature. What does not happen here is that all-too-typical retrospective imposition of the later development on the earlier stages.

The answer to what is medieval here is simple but unusual, and it ought to be our own: it is not merely what develops into the modern, it is in fact a great deal more than what would survive (or be allowed to survive) into the properly Spanish era. Here, then, there is far more than the usual passing mention (if that) of the Jews having a reinvention of poetry in their Golden Age in Spain (which in fact occurs during the same century in which the nascent Romance vernaculars are creating new poetries). Here, instead, the Jews (to take only this example, for the moment) are as much (or as little) Spaniards as anyone else inside the volume – from Seneca to

¹⁰ Cited in Ruggles, *Gardens*, p. 42.

Alfonso el Sabio – and their literature the subject of an extensive central chapter. This reflects the reality in the historical moment in which their culture flourished in Spain; their literature is in Hebrew, but that too is part of a Spanish tradition defined now as being multifaceted and encompassing languages that would later be rejected and exiled, and is thus named *literatura hebraicoespañola* ("Hebrew-Spanish literature"). One notes that here it is not even "hispanico" but "español" that is married to "hebraico" – as it is in "arábigoespañol."

What is lost?

The greatest challenge for literary histories that would want to follow this as a model is the *de facto* segregation it allows, since what these separate (if theoretically equal) chapters cannot really do is give a sense of how these different religious communities mostly also lived inside the shared cultural community that was the very essence of medieval Spain. What is lost, in the universe in which one community of scholars (and literary histories and courses and reading lists, the whole canonical apparatus that passes knowledge on, from one generation to the next) is devoted to one of the several languages of Toledo in the eleventh and twelfth and even thirteenth centuries (to take an easy example), while a completely different scholarly community, mostly incommunicado from the first, takes care of another of those languages, and the same for a third, and so forth? Clearly, we are never able to recover much of a sense of the extent to which the originality and achievements of medieval Spanish culture lay precisely in the lavish interplay of these languages – and their people, and their literature – and in all of the arts, in fact, since these productive intermarriages are everywhere, strikingly visible in architecture, for example, and understood clearly in music. Even when there were intact and separate religious communities, with their separate religious languages and beliefs, there was at the same time a degree of cultural intermingling and interchange whose first recorded – and lamented! – instance is perhaps that complaint by Paul Alvarus, about how well all those young Christian men knew their Arabic poetry. It does not occur to most literary historians of our own time that when they exclude that Arabic literature of which those Christians were so enamored (and much of which had in fact been written by Spaniards, Muslims whose ancestry in Spain by the mid ninth century went back more years than most Americans can claim for theirs in the United States), they are following the ideological program of religious and linguistic separation that Alvarus and others like him (eventually including the whole of the Inquisitorial tradition in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) wanted the Spaniards of their day and age

to follow. This separation has been more successful, ironically enough, among twentieth-century Hispanists, who seem to believe, by and large, that the long and venerable Arabic poetic tradition of Spain – the one so adored by even mid ninth-century Christians, who learned Arabic to read it and write it – is, after all, to be left to the Arabists.

What we should understand is that throughout the Middle Ages that segregationist and monolingual principle simply did not exist, or utterly failed when attempts were made to enforce it, and that, clearly, is what Alvarus' lament reveals: it is the depths of cultural assimilation and give-and-take that we glimpse there – and not its opposite, not what it is normally taken to mean, that the Christian community successfully resisted the cultural intermingling. Indeed, most of the other evidence surrounding the case of the famous Mozarab martyrs whom Paul Alvarus wrote about suggests that the Christian hierarchy of Cordoba was opposed to and appalled by their acts of gross and suicidal provocation of the Islamic state, into which most Christians (and churchmen) were fully integrated and within which they were protected (short of the sort of public blasphemy in which the martyrs indulged, knowing it would get them executed). Indeed, the old Visigothic liturgy in Latin was eventually translated into Arabic and it was in that language that it survived, intact and in its original form, for hundreds of years – only to be replaced eventually by the reformed Roman rite brought by the French Benedictine monks from Cluny toward the end of the eleventh century, a change bitterly contested by Spanish Christians for hundreds of years, since for them it was the Mozarabic rite, in Arabic (and not the newfangled version the northerners brought with them), that was the symbol of authentic Spanish Christianity, and its rite the remaining traditional one in Christendom. Medieval Spaniards of many different stripes appreciated that there was a radical difference between a religion, on the one hand, and a literary and philosophical culture, on the other.

It is difficult, when there are separate accounts of each of the religious-language communities, to convey how central a role both social and literary integration played in defining the character of medieval Spanish literature. One relatively straightforward example can stand for much else here: the Jews of the eleventh-century Golden Age were also, easily and simultaneously, readers and writers of the Arabic literary traditions, and in fact it was their expertise in Arabic letters that frequently won them high-ranking positions in Muslim dominions and, eventually, in Christian Spain, where their role as translators is well known. It was that intimate knowledge and love of Arabic poetry that made possible their creation of a quasi-vernacular literary Hebrew, the basis of the extraordinary reinvention of secular poetry in that long-fossilized liturgical language. At the same time, the Jews would also have been speakers of whatever the

vernacular was wherever they lived, certainly the Arabic vernacular during the years of the caliphate, but also one or more of the Romance vernaculars as well, beginning with the Romance spoken by the Mozarabs, those Christians who were so thoroughly assimilated into the Arabophone world, and ending, well, ending with the fifteenth-century Castilian they called *Ladino* (from "Latino," to distinguish it from Arabic and Hebrew) and took with them into exile after 1492, and continued to speak in exile until the twentieth century. To return for just one more moment to that eleventh century: when the Andalusian Jews were dramatically rewriting the history of Hebrew poetry it just so happens that other poetries were being dramatically reinvented as well. This is the pivotal moment in the history of the nascent Romance languages when the vernaculars were boldly emerging as the poetic languages that would throw out the old (Latin) and "make it new," as Ezra Pound, a devoted student of the earliest Romance lyrics, would famously say in his 1934 Modernist manifesto.

Medieval Europe in general (and Spain exceptionally so) is infinitely more variegated than the later periods can imagine, following as they do the establishment of single and defining national languages. The powerful culture of translation – a far more ubiquitous and disorganized and defining cultural phenomenon than what might be understood if we focus only on the phenomenon of the official "School of Translators" – was the Latin-Christian reaction to its direct exposure to the riches of the vast Arabic libraries, and this too began in the same eleventh century in which the new poetries in Hebrew and Romance were the poetic avant-gardes. In 1948, when we must assume the first volume of the *Historia general de las literaturas hispánicas* was in press, a Hebraist named Samuel Stern published an article that would reveal that there were, after all, surviving texts attesting to a literature that directly reflected those very interactions among languages and traditions and peoples that are nearly impossible to account for in a scholarly universe demarcated by national (and even religious) boundaries that were anything but divisions in the Middle Ages. What Stern exposed (and deciphered) was a body of poems written in either classical Hebrew or Arabic with a refrain – which in fact sets the versification and rhyme scheme for the whole of the poem – in a vernacular, most notably in the Romance vernacular that was the other language (besides Arabic) of the Christians known as Mozarabs. These poems were, and are, self-evidently the product of that complex and energetic universe of the Spanish eleventh century, and the news of their existence provoked scholarly excitement, although principally, and very ironically, on something like "nationalistic" grounds, since it was hailed as an earlier springtime for Romance verse than anyone had imagined. The Romance part of the poems – the refrains, and only the refrains in Mozarabic, for that matter – are divorced from the rest of their poems,

from the Hebrew and Arabic strophes which the Romance verses punctuate. As isolated snippets they become, in Spanish literary history, that elusive "first monument" of Spanish literature. Perhaps nothing speaks more clearly to the folly and the distortions of this backwards approach to the Spanish Middle Ages than this, the dismemberment of a bilingual poem, a poem whose bilingualism is not casual but rather foundational, and where the vernacular is not carelessly tacked on at the end, but rather, as with the society that produced it, the various languages, sometimes tied to religions and sometimes not, are intimately interlaced throughout.

What is lost in medieval Spanish literature is, in the first instance, the texts that did not survive the ravages of history: first, the commonplace conservation problems, those that wreak havoc with manuscripts, and that no doubt destroyed textual evidence of earlier versions of the story told in the famous *Poema de mio Cid* ("Poem of the Cid," written in the mid twelfth century, first copied down in 1207), to take but this one famous example; and second, the particular Spanish problems that led to the wholesale and purposeful destruction of books in Arabic and Hebrew in (especially) the sixteenth century. This latter practice was slyly satirized by Miguel de Cervantes with his "Inquisition of the Books" in Part I (chapter 5) of *Don Quijote* (1605) and then even more poignantly reflected in that most self-referential moment, in chapter 9, when the narrator discovers the manuscript that contains the story he is telling: an Arabic manuscript, about to be turned into pulp, in the old Jewish quarter of Toledo. Far more is lost than what has vanished materially, and perhaps the limits of our understanding of the literary history of medieval Spain are best symbolized by what happened to these bilingual poems after they were discovered, a fate of dismemberment worthy of Cervantine satire: we segregate the rich and interwoven traditions of the peninsula in ways that do extreme violence to the original literary cloth, that tear into rag-like pieces what was originally crafted as a luxurious fabric.¹¹

If the medieval is going to constitute the "beginnings" of the Spanish tradition then it can only do that after the medieval literary scene is understood on its own terms, and in its own languages.

¹¹ Two recent books which attempt to provide a grounding in the literatures and cultures of Islamic Spain are the encyclopedic tome edited by Salma Khaddra Jayyusi (*The Legacy of Muslim Spain* [Leiden: Brill, 1992]); and *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Al-Andalus*. Ed. Maria Rosa Menocal, Raymond Scheindlin, and Michael Sells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).