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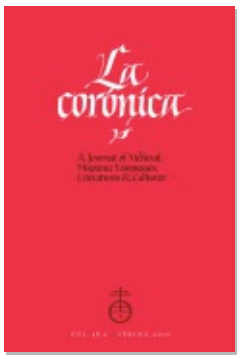

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ANOTHER ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET:

AN APPRECIATION OF PETER COLE

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A is for Alphabet. Or Andalusianist, or Arabic, or Aleph, or Abu Ayyub Sulaiman Ibn Yahya Ibn Jabirul, which is the opening entry in Cole's own "Andalusian Alphabet", which itself serves as the unorthodox introduction to his volume of translations of Ibn Gabirol. Although I am an amateur at this, and Peter an adept, I offer this alphabet as a small tribute to his work.

B is for brave and for the brave new world into which Peter Cole has ventured, ahead of us. Peter the poet, the self-taught, bravely ventured into those poetic territories of Spain before it was Spain, territories long the precincts only of those with decades of formal training in tough languages and even tougher philologies. And he returned with the poetry.

C is for Carrión, and also Christian, the lands of those poorer cousins of the Andalusian Jews. The breadth of Peter's dream is such that they too are brought back to us, in their own splendor, and in their touching kinship to ourselves, their own mourning for Halevi and for Andalus – all those Ibn

Ezras and their laments! And maybe also their fears are like ours: "Tomorrow I'll write", is how Santob wrily hedges his bets, those of the Jew in old Castile in the fourteenth century – are they fears of belatedness?

D is for David, and that breathtaking conceit from Peter's first volume that brought us the Nagid in all his splendor: "I am the David of my age". This the apt signature line of that first of the great ones, Samuel the Granadan and, beyond him, of the Andalusians and, beyond them, of their late twentieth-century avatar – for is that not what a great translator is but an avatar? That voice in our own language that makes that "I am the David of my age" ring true? Perhaps A should have been for avatar. And of course D also needs to summon up Darwish and his great gift of a line, that poetic line that has given Peter his perfect title, *The Dream of the Poem*, so there we have yet another D, for Dream.

E is for Europe, or perhaps European letters, or maybe more simply and accurately English and its expansive literary traditions, including the American one. This, now, the poetic universe whose door Peter has opened, where we can now glimpse the Nagid, and Santob, and many dozens of others in between, in their Cole avatars. Definitely, A should have been for avatar.

F is pretty obviously, I would say, for faith, or is it Faith? What could be more at the heart of what we all struggle with, when we live and work with this jumble of multiple confessions that crowded into the Iberian peninsula during those centuries? An age of jostling and elbowing that made it into something that is likely to remind us of one of those great souks of Morocco? Faith that could at once be the clear division between one man and the next, and at the same time the intimate tie between them. Faith was the bedrock of the new Hebrew poetry of the Jews, and yet . . . and yet how lovely and how blessed that it was also a faith profligate enough to revel in the poetry of those other faiths, and most of all that faith professed by Ibn ʿArabi, the religion of love: "Wherever its caravan turns along the way, that is the belief, the faith I keep".

G is for the generosity that makes the poetry of Ibn ʿArabi too a part of the language and imagination of the English-speaking world now, thanks

to Peter Cole the publisher. He and Adina Hoffman have long had another labor of love, a jewel-box press called Ibis Editions. G is also then for gifts: these other books they publish and that also cultivate avatars, books bearing gifts of love and faith in the Levant, which is itself sometimes a dream, and that dream often has Andalus in its heart. Not least among them *Stations of Desire,* in which Ibn ʿArabi is conjured by Michael Sells, another of these magicians who somehow are able to pull medieval Spain out of their hats. G is also for Geniza, that treasure house –or is it a magic hat?– that has for decades now been generosity itself, with its seemingly endless trove of voices from that world we long to be able to listen to, to hear. And now Peter and Adina, together, are writing its biography.

H is not for hats, not even for those magic hats within which Arabic and Hebrew poetries cannot be conjured without each other. H has a whole constellation of possibilities from the heart of this enterprise: Halevi, Hebrew, History, just to start. In the Cole "Andalusian Alphabet" the entry is "Heinrich Heine or the History of Transmission"; here is a key that opens that door into a universe we, the philologists, are most likely to ignore, or at any rate figure is not what we are paid to explore. So perhaps H is really for hole, as in rabbit hole, and how delightful to sometimes close our eyes and jump right in and find ourselves in the worlds of later poets of many stripes and languages who have also loved what we love. Here the poetry of our universe was not mere scholarly proof-text, but poems in the continuous life of poetry, still alive in the legacy of a Heine, in the truncated life of Federico Garcia Lorca, in the long- and many-lived Layla.

I, inevitably, is for Ibn, Ibn this and Ibn that, everywhere the Ibns have it here, and how could one even begin to choose among them, the one to put above all others? The really clever alphabet-writer could probably write a whole Andalusian alphabet where the Ibn is taken for granted: Ibn ʿArabi, Ibn Bassam, Ibn Dannan, Ibn Ezra –and enough characters answer to Ibn Ezra that it would require practically its own sub-alphabet!– as far out as Ibn Zaydun, wondrous son of Ishbiliya. His "Nuniyya" insists on the elegant wealth of a single letter, a single perfect rhyme, and thus stands as something of a reproach to our profligacy, here we are indulging in an entire alphabet.

J is for Jerusalem, the real and the imaginary, the fractured and difficult Jerusalem that has long been Peter's home, the dreamy beloved Jerusalem that was conjured by Halevi, who counted himself unlucky to be in the West when Jerusalem seemed to him to be in the East, although there were also Jews for whom the enchantments of Jerusalem had all, as if by Borgesian sleight of hand, been transferred to the West, and were to be sought, and found, in the winding streets of Toledo.

K could be for *kaaba*, for circling pilgrims, which is above all that place where we can understand the ways in which poetry is one of the avatars of faith – or perhaps it is the other way around. But k could actually also stand for what is not really a k at all, but needs the k to be conjured up in English, that *kh* that leads us to *kharja*, or closure, such as it ever is, and that would lead us to one of those may poems of Peter's where we become one with those flirtations in Mozarabic:

Oh, I'll
love you alright;
so
long as you
manage to bend

both of my
anklets
back to the
thin silver
earrings you gave me.
(*Hymns and Qualms* now in *What is Doubled*)

L is for Ladino, and the vagaries of exile, the strange names by which all exiles end up being known, in the translations of diasporas. After all, Ladino only means Latin, which in turn really ends up being a way of saying what it was not: it was neither Hebrew nor Arabic, but the old language of the old Christians which, with the exquisite irony of history, would become the language of the Jews in exile. It is exile itself that creates first the poetic name of this language –which in Toledo was Castilian instead– and then preserves it, not exactly in amber but with enough sentimental attachment that the dream of the poem sometimes revealed itself in that accent, in that way of

speaking what for others is merely Spanish.

M is definitely for miracle, as in the opening sentence of the introduction of *The Dream of the Poem*: "'The Spanish Miracle' –three words were all it took S. D. Goitein, the great historian of medieval Mediterranean society, to sum up the phenomenon that was the Golden Age of Hebrew poetry in Iberia".

See also: ***Q,*** for Qur'an

N is for the Nagid, the volume that brought Peter Cole into our orbit, our frame of reference, a book of eleventh-century poems from Spain that was reviewed widely, and outside the academic ghetto, and made medieval Spain almost famous. Who ever heard of such a thing?

O is for Ortega y Gasset, who lent his then-famous philosophical name to the twentieth-century revival of Ibn Hazm and to the Spanish version of the *Tauq al-Hamama*, the *Collar de la Paloma*. Ortega's preface to the Emilio García Gómez translation also throws down a gauntlet: are they Spaniards or are they not? Are their sensibilities, their morals –their poetry, most of all– anything at all like ours?

P is all too obviously for poet and poetry. I recently gave a poet friend of mine –someone who has himself written a "Poet's Alphabet"– two books as a birthday gift: my last book,and *The Dream of the Poem*. Every time I see him, he says, "How beautiful those poems are". Sometimes he calls and says: "I am deeply touched by those poems, and I've been reading one or two every day". One day he also thought to add: "I will get to your book one of these days", but probably he never will and little matter: the matter of Andalus, and the rest of medieval Spain, will far more likely survive in these serendipitous chains of poetic transmission.

Q is for the Qur'an, one of the embodiments of the miracles of poetry and its transformative powers, right up there with the water-into-wine kind of metamorphosis. Although Muhammad did not like being taken for a poet (as if he had been reading Plato, he was adamant on the difference between his truth-telling and the lies and fabrications of the poets), he held up the Qur'an itself and its inimitable language as the miracle God gave him, the

proof of his authenticity as God's own prophet. And everywhere that Arabic followed, with the spread of the Qur'an, young men lusted for its powers, as Alvarus reminds us in his lament over all those young Cordobans who had left Latin behind and become Arab-like in their appetite for *ghazals* and odes and *qasidas* and probably Laylas too.

R is for ruins, the ruins that lie at the beginning of memory, and thus poetry: the ruins or traces or shards of past loves, lost civilizations.

S –how could it be otherwise?– is for Sefarad, whose other names are Andalus and España, and Spain, itself another S. That medley of names should not fool us, it is much as with our own different names: the patronymic, the childhood nickname, the lover's endearment, the name left behind at Ellis Island, perhaps, or the name that a grandchild may one day know us by. They speak to our different aspects, to the different moments in a life, the kaleidoscope of relationships, all those strands that go into making what a person is, or was.

T could be for Toledo or, better still, for Todros Abulafia, one of the great discoveries to be made in *The Dream of the Poem*, a denizen of Toledo at the time of the rule of Alfonso X. At least once in a while Todros was also a part of Alfonso's court, but best of all he is a poet of breathtaking directness, whether it is in contemplating the difference between sex with women of different faiths (Muslim women infinitely better than Christians, in case you were wondering) or the injustice and degradations of prison, where he ended up as part of a group of Jews held for ransom. T could also rightly claim to stand for Taha, the Palestinian poet Taha Muhammad Ali whose poems Peter has not only translated (see the glorious volume *So What*) but also literally gives voice to: in recent years Taha and Peter have drawn vast crowds to their recitations, Taha in Arabic, Peter in English; if you have not witnessed it before see it without further ado on YouTube. All of which leads to the inevitable: In this alphabet in honor of Peter Cole, T can only really stand for Translation, capital T on purpose, that most noble task he performs with such clarity of purpose. So that means that T should also thus stand for the last volume of his own poetry, *Things on Which I've Stumbled*,

where the poetic core of translation, which is a way of saying discovery, is laid out, in all its incandescence.

U then, I suppose, should evoke the concept of untranslatability, as hoary a cliché as they come. So what? So you don't read the *Illiad* because your Homeric Greek is rusty? So you don't write about poetry because it is so famously untranslatable into prose? Please.

V is for the voice that translators give to the exiled past, which is what keeps them –and thus parts of us– from the void of being altogether forgotten.

W is for writing, and for work, as in the kind of writing that we do, and the series of questions that follow: How has Peter's work tweaked how we think about our own work, our writing of the literary history of medieval Spain? W is also for writing in alphabets, which has its limits, and the limit is probably best established here as W, since X pushes all alphabet-writers into a corner, and occasional sillyness. Although in the alphabets of Andalus Y and Z do beckon, with the promise of all those Yahyas, or Yça of Segovia –once famous for the first Spanish translation of the Qur'an– and then Zaida and Ziryab and, zajal, oh how those zajals of Ibn Quzman call out, surely they can't be left behind.

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