

“Primary Documents on Andalusia and Literature”
selected by Ammiel Alcalay

Text 1

Understanding that the history of this small planet is migration and expansion as one group of people with their culture and language move in on another. It makes me wonder about Spain and how unprepared they were for expansion in 1492. It was the same year they were fighting the Arabs in Granada to regain Castilian territory. It was one of Europe’s most divided nations, a land conquered and reconquered. It had no linguistic unity to speak of. Within its borders people spoke Basque, Catalan, Castilian, Aragonese, Hebrew, Arabic, and then there were the Gypsies with their universal speech stew. Spain had its golden period during the Arabian occupation, which commenced in A.D. 711 and lasted some 800 years. The Arabs encouraged the study of science and the development of the arts. Public libraries were established in the large cities. Religious tolerance allowed Jews as well as Christians to practice their manner of worship and to communicate one with the other. Men of learning such as Averroes, Avicenna, Ibn `Arabi began to translate and comment upon dormant Greek classics, contributing to the reawakening of Europe. It was a place of great architecture, great centers of medicine and beautiful paths that led to gardens where fountains were flowing with water. The Moors gave the Visigoths much to improve and enhance their civilization. There was much intermarriage and many Christians abandoned their religion for that of their conquerors. It is clear that much of what came upon those boats from Spain across the Atlantic contained this Islamic Dynamism. The Spanish is full of Arabian words as well as indigenous words; add to that the inclusion of Africa to our world and you get a picture of the rich universal vocabulary that we are coming down the mountain and streets with.

Victor Hernandez Cruz; contemporary poet from Puerto Rico
(from: Red Beans, Coffee House Press, 1991, p. 132)

Text 2

There was yet another way in which the encounter of Christian and Muslim in medieval Spain has powerfully affected later and distant human experience. Medieval Spaniards and Portuguese worked out by trial and error ways in which to administer large tracts of newly conquered territory and to govern their inhabitants. Thus, when an overseas empire was acquired in the sixteenth century, models and precedents existed for the guidance of those whose task it was to rule it. In this, as in so much else, there was little that was new about the

so-called “early modern” period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Colonial Mexico and Peru and Brazil were medieval Andalusia writ large. Much that is central to the subsequent experience of Latin America follows from this.

In today’s conditions the most awkward of Spain’s national historical mythology is precisely what gave it potency in the past -- its in-built hostility to Islam. Perceived as alien, how can Islam’s positive contributions to Peninsular culture be accommodated harmoniously in a vision of the national past? If Muslims and Muslim observances have been persecuted or frowned upon for centuries in Spain, if Africans in general have been regarded with fear and contempt, how can acknowledgment of indebtedness be gracefully made, hostility give way to amity? It is obvious that these questions have special relevance today. The western world has become acutely and painfully conscious in recent years of the need to understand the culture of Islam. The peoples of Islam cannot, as too often in the past, be neglected, bullied, or exploited. If there are difficulties in the way that the Peninsular peoples have liked to interpret their past -- and it is important that their partners in a European community should be aware both of the interpretation and of its difficulties -- perhaps it is timely to hasten the dismantling of mythology. The plain fact is that between 712 and 1492 Muslim and Christian communities lived side by side in the Iberian Peninsula, clutched in a long, intimate embrace: sharing a land, learning from one another, trading, intermarrying, misunderstanding, squabbling, fighting -- generally indulging in all the incidents that go to furnish the ups and downs of coexistence or relationship. National myths have to simplify if they are to be widely accessible and acceptable. But this scene was not a simple one: it was a diverse and boisterous and crowded life.

Richard Fletcher; British Historian (from: Moorish Spain, pp. 8-9)

Text 3

The crystallization of the concept of Europeaness and its ancestry was largely spun out in the nineteenth century, and it played a critical role at this moment of the high pitched awareness of the particularity and superiority of Europe that came with the imperial and colonial experience and the post-Romantic experience with the Orient. This experience certainly helped sharpen the perception not only of European community and continuity but also its difference from others, or from the Other. It was an Other (and the Arab world was one of its principal

manifestations) that Europe was by its own standards bringing out of the darkness and civilizing, at least as far as that was possible for those who were not European in the first place.

Thus was eliminated the possibility that the Middle Ages might be portrayed as a historical period in which a substantial part of culture and learning was based in a radically foreign culture. To view an Arabic-Islamic component, even in its European manifestations, as positive and essential would have been unimaginable, and it would remain so long as the views and scholarship molded in that period continued to inform our education. The proposition that the Arab world had played a critical role in the making of the modern West, from the vantage point of the late nineteenth century and the better part of this century is in clear and flagrant contradiction of cultural ideology. It is unimaginable in the context of the readily observable phenomenon that was institutionalized as an essential element of European ideology and that has remained so in many instances to this day: cultural supremacy over the Arab world.

Maria Rosa Menocal (from: The Arab Role in Medieval Literary History, p. 6)

Text 4

This is a list of items dealt in by Nahray ben Nissim, a well-known 11th c. wholesaler.

1. Flax, exported from Egypt to Tunisia and Sicily.
2. Silk (from Spain and Sicily) and other fabrics, from Syrian or European cotton to North African felt, and textiles of all descriptions, from robes to bedcovers.
3. Olive oil soap, and wax from Tunisia, occasionally also from Palestine and Syrian.
4. Oriental spices, such as pepper, cinnamon, and clove, sent from Egypt to the West.
5. Dyeing, tanning and varnishing materials such as brazilwood, lacquer, and indigo (sent from East to West); sumac and gallnuts (from Syria to Egypt); saffron (from Tunisia to the East).
6. Metals (copper, iron, lead, mercury, tin, silver ingots), all West to East.
7. Books (Bibles, Talmuds, legal and edifying literature, grammars, and Arabic books).
8. Aromatics, perfumes and gums (aloe, ambergris, camphor, frankincense, gum arabic, mastic gum, musk, betel leaves).

9. Jewelry and semiprecious stones (gems, pearls, carnelians, turquoise, onyxes, and the like).
10. Materials (such as beads, “pomegranate” strings, coral, cowry shells, lapis lazuli, and tortoise shell) used for ornaments and trinkets.
11. Chemicals (alkalai, alum, antimony, arsenic, bamboo crystals, borax, naphtha, sulfur, starch, vitriol).
12. Foodstuffs, such as sugar, exported from Egypt, or dried fruits, imported from Syria.
13. Hides and leather. Also furs and shoes. All coming from, or even through, Tunisia and Sicily.
14. Pitch, an important article.
15. Varia, such as palm fiber, and items not yet identified with certainty.

(from: A Mediterranean Society, vol. 1, p. 154)

Text 5

In the days of my youth a very important conference was held in Fez, to which many scholars from all over the known world traveled. My father took part in it. The subject under discussion was the designation of the land most propitious to the free development of man. Each doctor first argued for his own country, and next for Greece, which for long remained the favorite; but Persia, the Kingdom of Damascus, Samaria and the banks of the Jordan, Lower Egypt, Provence, and even the town of Paris, each stood a good chance until the very end. When he returned my father gave the community a florid account of this conference, for we earned the place of honor: it was Andalusia that had won the final vote. Al-Andalus, my province, consummate harmony between nature and man, whose pearl was Cordova...

The world in those days was like a sieve shaken by anger. There were empires that lasted a century, and empires that lasted a day. Something was trying to be born, something that nobody recognized, and which is born only in order to die: I mean man as an individual human being. Jerusalem had been destroyed, Athens forgotten, Alexandria was in ashes, Isfahan engulfed in her legend, except in the nostalgia of a few, whose insensate dream was to rebuild a city of happiness. Who could foresee that the lot would fall upon Cordova?

... Those children playing ball on the towpath, those men crossing the Roman bridge or loitering by the street stalls, those women gliding with tiny steps along

the white facades, were they Jews, Christians, or Moslems? No one would have been able to tell. No one cared. They were Cordovans, even if they had only just arrived from Tetuan or Saragossa. Certainly the town described three concentric semicircles, following the river: on the periphery the Spanish Mozarabs, in the middle the Muslim Arabs, in the center the Jewry; but the streets were alike, the houses identical, the people interchangeable, and I never felt as if I were chorusing a frontier when I went from one end of the city to the other, nor did I ever feel out of my element when I was away from home.

Herbert Le Porrier (From: The Doctor from Cordoba: A biographical novel about the great philosopher Maimonides; translated Barbara Wright; Doubleday, 1979)

Text 6

I'm back in Spain again, this time more to the south, for a seminar on Ibn `Arabi, a commemoration of the 750th anniversary of his death. Spain descends towards the South, and in the landscape, Arab castles follow one after the other (Chimerical castles!), ochre, in ruins, tenacious and crumbling, like everything that is Arabic. The plain shrinks, the high peaks stand on each side with miradors still standing guard. The witness to the civil wars of Arabic Spain make me think that nothing can destroy an Arab better than another Arab.

The anguish caused by the possibility of an impending war against Iraq inhabits my mind since August 2, and makes me extremely sensitive to this line of fortresses which the Arabs have left here behind them.

Spain (or should I say the Inquisition?) has carefully erased the traces of its Arabs. And this cultural genocide was soon followed by the slaughter of the Indians... and Spain will tomorrow celebrate the quincentennial of its conquest!

These last few days we have spoken of Ibn `Arabi as if we were dealing with a ghost or shadow. Where is his house? Where are the places he frequented, the libraries of his parents, the gardens in which he played? Hearing the Arabic words behind the Spanish ones, I tell myself that Andalusia is the first loss, the death of the Mother, and of the orchards of which Lorca was the last tree.

**Etel Adnan; contemporary Lebanese and American writer
(from: Of Cities and Women: Post-Apollo Press, 1993; pp.47-56)**

Text 7

“Rider’s Song”

Cordoba.
Distant and lone.

Black mount, lush mount
and olives in my saddle bag.
Even when I know the roads
I shall never arrive at Cordoba.

Along the plain, through the wind,
black mount, coral moon.
Death watches over me
from the towers of Cordoba.

What an interminable road!
My mount is so valiant!
Oh the death that lies in wait
before arriving at Cordoba.

Cordoba
Distant and lone.

By Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936)

Text 8

100 black clad horsemen.
Where would they go,
along the low sky

of the orange grove?

Neither Cordoba nor
Seville will they reach.
Nor Granada
craving for the sea.

Those drowsy horses
will carry them
to a latticed labyrinth
where the gist of song trembles.
With seven studded woes,
where would they go,
the hundred Andalusian
horsemen of the grove?

Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936)

Text 9

“Psalm 16”

I toy with time
As an emir caresses a horse.
I play with the days
As children play with colored marbles.

Today I celebrate
The passing of a day on the previous one
And tomorrow I shall celebrate
The passing of two days on yesterday.
I drink the toast of yesterday
In remembrance of the coming day
And this I carry on my life.

When I fell from my mettlesome horse

And broke my arm,
My finger, wounded a thousand years ago,
Gave me pain.

When I commemorated the passing of forty days on the city of
Acre's death,
I burst out weeping for Granada.

And when the hangman's noose encircled my neck,
I felt such hatred for my enemies
For having stolen my tie.

Mahmoud Darwish; contemporary Palestinian poet
(from: The Music of Human Flesh, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies;
Three Continents Press, 1980, p. 50)

Text 10

Three Moorish women
won my love in Jaen:
Aisha and Fatma and Marien.

Three Moorish women so comely
went to net olives
and found themselves caught
in Jaen:
Aisha and Fatma and Marien.

They found themselves caught
and returned sorely afflicted
their flush cast as ash
in Jaen.

Three Moorish women so spry
went to pick apples

in Jaen:

Aisha and Fatma and Marien.

Anonymous Spanish poem (15th c., translated by Ammiel Alcalay)

Text 11

One day I was in the Alcana in Toledo, when a lad came to sell some parchments and old papers to a silk merchant. Now as I have a taste for reading even torn papers lying in the streets, I was impelled by my natural inclination to take up one of the parchment books the lad was selling, and saw in it characters which I recognized them, I could not read them, and looked around to see if there was not some Spanish-speaking Moor about to read them to me; and it was not difficult to find such an interpreter there. For, even if I had wanted one for a better and older language, I should have found one.

**Miguel Cervantes (from: Don Quixote, trans. J. M. Cohen;
Penguin Books, 1950; p.76)**

Text 12

God made possible
That the Moors of this kingdom
With so many persecutions
Would be punished and enslaved.
Having lost the books,
Without leaving a trace;
Scholars are gone
Some dead, others jailed,
The Inquisition rampant
With great force and pressures,
Implementing with rigor

Cruelty and excesses;
Almost everywhere
The earth is made to tremble:
They apprehend here and there
The newly baptized,
Imposing on them every day
Galleys, torment, and fire
Along with other calamities
For which God alone knows the secret.

**Muhammad Rabadan; Spanish poet and theologian from Aragon, exiled in
Tunis in the 16th c. (From: Anwar G. Ghenje; Islam and the West: The
Moriscos, A Cultural and Social History; State University of New York
Press, 1983; p.163)**

Text 13

Writer, have you in your hand a lance of fire,
or a flaming sword,
or a spear,
Or is it the tree of knowledge of good and evil,
or have you made it
a rod of miracles?

**Shem Tob Arduziel; 14th c. Jewish poet from Castille (from: Sanford
Shepard, Shem Tov: His World and His Words; Ediciones Universal, 1978;
p.80)**

Text 14

I am Ben Ammar: My repute
Is not obscure to any one
Except the fool, who would dispute
The splendor of the moon and sun.

It is no wonder if I come
So late, when time is at an end;
The glosses that expound the tome
Are ever on the margins penned.

Ibn Ammar, Andalusian poet; 1031-1086 (from: Anthology of Islamic Literature, ed. James Kritzeck; New American Library, 1975; p. 143)

Text 15

“Apology”

Don't cross me off as fickle
because a singing heart
has captured my heart.

One must be serious sometimes
and lighthearted at other times:

like wood from which come
both the singer's lute
and the warrior's bow.

Ibrahim ibn `Uthman (12th c. Cordoba) (from: Poems of Andalusia, trans. Cola Franzen; City Lights, 1989)

Text 16

“War”

War is at first like a beautiful girl
with whom all men long to play,
but in the end like a repulsive hag
whose suitors all weep and ache.

“The Jasmine”

Look at the jasmine, whose branches,
leaves, and stems are green as chrysolite,
whose flowers are white as rock crystal,
whose tendrils are red as carnelian
like a white faced youth whose hands
are shedding the blood of innocent men.

“In the Ruined Citadel”

I billeted a strong force overnight in a
citadel laid waste in former days by other
generals. There we slept upon its back and
flanks, while under us its landlords slept.
And I said in my heart: Where are the many
people who once lived here? Where are the
builders and vandals, the rulers and paupers,
the slaves and masters? Where are the begetters
and the bereaved, the fathers and sons,
the mourners and bridegrooms? And
where are the many people born after
the other had died, in days gone by, after
other days and years? Once they lodged
upon the earth; now they are lodged within
it. They passed from their palaces to the
grave, from pleasant courts to dust.
Were they now to raise their heads and
emerge, they would rob us of our lives
and pleasures. Oh, it is true, my soul,
most true; tomorrow I shall be
like them, and all these troops as well!

“Heaven and Earth”

I survey the heavens and stars; I look
at the earth with its creeping creatures;
and I understand in my heart they
were all intricately fashioned. Look up
at the sky -- like a tent, whose clasps
are joined to it by loops; the moon and
its stars -- like a shepherdess grazing her

flock in a pasture; the moon among the
sweeping clouds -- like a ship sailing
with raised pennants; a cloud -- like
a girl walking through a garden,
watering the myrtles; a cloud of dew --
like a maiden shaking the drops from
her hair onto the ground. But the earth's
inhabitants are like an army pitching its
tents for a night, looting the local granaries.
And all flee before the terror of death --
like a dove chased by a hawk. All are
doomed to be like an earthenware
plate which has been smashed to bits.

**Samuel Hanagid, 993-1056; born in Cordoba,
served as commander of the armies of Granada
(from: The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse edited by T. Carmi;
Penguin, 1981).**

Text 17

“Poem from Prison”

Debris and mire are spit up by the sea
but corals sink to the very depths. This
is Time's way: to raise the worthless and,
in that elevation, humiliate the noble.
Time turns good and bad upside down --
it mocks those who think they've reached
their station, but anyone of intelligence
must come to taunt it, amuse themselves
with a 'perhaps' or an 'if.' After all,
that pulls down the innocent
and uplifts the wanting.

Todros Abulfia (c. 1247-1295, born in Toledo, trans. Ammiel Alcalay)

Text 18

One action may resemble another action, so that the two actions are thought to be identical even though they are not. For example, consider three dark places: the sun shines upon one of them, and it is illumined; the moon rises over the second place and it is illumined; a lamp is lit in the third place, and it is illumined. Light is found in each one of them, but the reason for the first light and its cause is the sun, the cause of the second is the moon, and the cause of the third is the fire... There is no notion common to all of them except through equivocation. Grasp this notion, for it is extraordinarily marvelous.

Moses Maimonides, from The Eight Chapters, in Ethical Writing of Maimonides, ed. Raymond L. Weiss with Charles E. Butterworth (New York: Dover, 1983), p. 62.

Text 19

“Jasmine: Poem on Sandpaper”

Fairuz raises her lips
to heave
to let jasmine rain down
on those who once met
without knowing they were in love
I'm listening to her in Muhammad's
Fiat at noon on Ibn Gabirol Street.
A Lebanese singer playing in an Italian car
that belongs to an Arab poet from
Baqā' al-Gharbiyye on a street named
after a Hebrew poet who lived in Spain.
And the jasmine?
If it falls from the sky at the end of days
it'll stay green for
just a second at
the next light.

Ronny Someck; Israeli poet
(from Keys to the Garden: New Israeli Writing, edited and translated by
Ammiel Alcalay; City Lights Books, 1996; p. 333).