

# THE VIRTUES OF EXILE:

AN APPRECIATION OF MARÍA ROSA  
MENOCA, 1953-2012

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It is raining today in Seville. Through the falling torrent, heavy enough to cancel my plans and keep me at home, I can still see the iconic cityscape from my balcony. Looking beyond the baroque façades and bell gables, I can take in at once *La Giralda*—the cathedral’s bell tower, formerly the minaret of the twelfth-century Almohad mosque—and the top crenellations of the walls around the palace and gardens of the Alcázar, expanded by king Pedro I of Castile in the fourteenth century, and I can even make out the *Torre de oro*—another Almohad fortification along the Guadalquivir. When I first saw this stunning view, which encompasses in a single sweep so many layers of historical contact, conquest, interpenetration, and imitation, my thoughts were not of the Almohads or Pedro I but of María Rosa Menocal, my mentor and friend. These were things that inspired her work, because she saw buildings and gardens like manuscripts and images: For her, all were texts expressed in a single, polyphonic cultural language. It was with this vista before me that I opened my mail a few days later and received news of

her passing on October 15, 2012.

Now, I am reminded of her every day by the monuments of the city. I turn a corner, or hear a bell, and I imagine she is with me, explaining with great enthusiasm some striking fact of Iberian history, some curious connection between buildings and literature. Taking my children to school yesterday, I happened to pass the church of San Marcos, one of a number of small churches established after the Christian conquest of Muslim Seville in 1248. Founded, like many Sevillian churches, on the site of a former mosque, it was then partly rebuilt in the so-called “mudéjar Gothic” style by order of Pedro I at the same time as the Alcázar (and then partly rebuilt in the fifteenth century after a fire). Looking at the original bell tower, built in imitation of *La Giralda*, I was suddenly transported back over a decade to a class in which María Rosa explained the difficulty of defining the *mudéjar*, because the examples all transcend the category in their particularity and complexity. It does not, she would say, merely reflect a style but embraces an entire lifestyle, and touched architecture and design as much as poetry and grammar.

Passing the church, these thoughts still in my mind, I walked the kids to their door and noticed that it was decorated with arabesque tiles and inscriptions, probably from the nineteenth century. I felt dizzy as I contemplated the irony of this discovery: it so happens that the school building itself, a stone’s throw from San Marcos, occupies the site where King Alfonso XI (Pedro’s father) kept his mistress, Leonor de Guzmán, and it is said that their son, the bastard Enrique de Trastámara (the first of the Trastámara monarchic line, after he killed his legitimate brother Pedro I in 1369) was born there. As I contemplated these *faux*-Arabic inscriptions and “neo-mudéjar” arches—imitations of imitations, each based on a desire to connect the present with the past—I thought again of María Rosa, how she often told stories about Pedro, of his patronage of the Jewish poet Sem Tob of Carrión, of his hot-and-cold relationship with his treasurer Samuel Halevi Abulafia (who built the Tránsito Synagogue in Toledo with Pedro’s approval, but was later tortured and killed by his order), of his beloved Alcázar, just next to Seville’s old Jewish quarter. She told how Pedro housed his own mistress, María



de Padilla, within the Alcázar (one can still visit her private underground baths), but was hardly able to enjoy his completed palace before his betrayal and murder by his half-brother (perhaps a just fate, because Pedro had killed another of his half brothers, Enrique's twin Fadrique, inside the Alcázar eleven years earlier). I can think of no one who would swoon with more delight than she if I could tell her that the seed of Pedro's own tragic downfall, and of Nasrid Granada as well—since the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella were both Enrique's great-great grandchildren—had sprouted in the shadow of a little-regarded mudéjar church, that Enrique's birthplace, like the Alcázar, had since been redecorated with the imitative ornaments of Romantic nostalgia, and that it all lay sleeping now in plain sight.

María Rosa had a love for such serendipitous intersections of loss, longing, remembrance, and reinvention, and she was fascinated by stories of those who were the first and the last. She often described her doctoral studies in what was in the United States an old-fashioned and, in her words, “dying-out field”: Romance Philology. When she finished her dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania on the connections between the Arabic-Romance lyric poems of al-Andalus (southern Iberia under the Muslims) and the love songs of the Provençal and northern Iberian Troubadours (1979a), “Romance Philology” was no longer the broad and comparative field it had been at its zenith earlier in the twentieth century under the influence of legendary philologists such as Alfred Adler, Erich Auerbach, and Leo Spitzer. The program at Pennsylvania, like most departments of languages across the country, soon after stopped offering degrees in “philology” and began to provide doctoral training in individual Romance languages and traditions. María Rosa was, in fact, among the last recipients of the degree from Penn.

I always understood her story about Romance philology to be a kind of lament over the state of medieval studies. After all, she herself said in a 2001 lecture (and on other occasions as well) that the “death” of philology was “just one of the ways in which scholarship was being unambiguously defined, pragmatically if not explicitly, as a matter of greater specialization rather than greater vision and breadth”. (“Writing Without Footnotes” [2001c], 2). Thinking back on these remarks now, however, it strikes me that

her words were not only a lament; they were also a statement of pride. She saw herself and her work as struggling to preserve not simply a discipline but a way of understanding. The torch she carried was that of the vital and unique importance of medieval studies as a comparative discipline. This claim of a lost philological ancestry—and the accompanying story she so often repeated of Auerbach writing *Mimesis* from within exile in Turkey, supposedly with no full library to consult and with no footnotes— was, in an important way, a kind of keynote to María Rosa's thought and work, all of which can be linked together with the interwoven threads of exile, genealogy, memory, and the necessary intersection between personal and disciplinary histories.

María Rosa's vision of medieval history and literature ran parallel to her own captivating story of exile, loss, and remembrance. She was born in 1953 in Havana, Cuba, the daughter of Enrique and Rosa Menocal. Her family had close ties to the University of Havana. She was the granddaughter of Feliciano "Chana" Villalón y Wilson and Juan Manuel Menocal, a professor at the university and a relative of the painter Armando Menocal, whose frescos decorate its walls. (Armando was himself a very distant cousin of Mario García Menocal, President of Cuba from 1913-21). Chana was also the daughter of a professor there and her face—she was, it is said, very beautiful—was used as the model for the Alma Mater statue at the main university entrance, which still stands today. Her father Enrique, one of their six children, studied at the university alongside Fidel Castro, but her family then fled to the United States a year after the Cuban Revolution, when María Rosa was seven, and settled in the Philadelphia area. María Rosa attended the University of Pennsylvania between 1969-79 (and also studied Arabic at the American University in Cairo in the late 70s), earning a B.A. (1973), an M.A. in French (1975), and a Ph.D. in Romance philology (1979). After teaching briefly at Bryn Mawr College, she was an assistant professor at Penn and acting director of its Center for Italian Studies before joining the faculty at Yale in 1986. From 2001-12, she was director of the Yale's Whitney Humanities Center, and at the time of her death, she was also Sterling Professor of Humanities, the highest rank conferred by Yale upon



its professorate.

The themes of loss and return, of wandering through what she called “palaces of memory”, run through many of her books and articles, from the early essay “Al-Andalus and 1492: The Ways of Remembering” (1992a) and her second book, *Shards of Love: Exile and the Origins of the Lyric* (1994a), to her later reflections, “Ten Years After: The Virtues of Exile” (1999c) or the prologue to the Radwa Ashur’s novel *Granada*, “Ways of Remembering Granada” (2003g), to the final piece published in her lifetime, “Remembering John Boswell’s Medieval Spain” (2011a). She was fond of stories of those who were exiled and who ached for their homeland, from Abd al-Rahmān I, to Ibn Zaydūn and Moses Maimonides, to the Jews of Iberia after 1492 or the Moriscos after 1609. At the time of her death, she had been working for several years on a book about Cuban exiles, for which she interviewed relatives who fled Cuba and settled abroad. Seeing medieval literature through the lens of her memory of revolution and displacement was, I believe, a means of identifying with the past and understanding its meaningful connection to the struggles of the present. Personalizing history was her deliberate strategy for signaling our individual duty to combat modern myths of exclusive ethnic, religious, or cultural identity. For her, it was also a means of affirming the ongoing relevance of medieval studies in dismantling what she saw as the most perilous and damaging of these myths, the illusory claims of pure and immutable national traditions and languages. As she put it movingly in a 2001 lecture on what she called the “virtues of exile”, “The shape of our memories —the way in which we conceive of our cultural history— is an immeasurably powerful element in the way we construct our future” (“Exile and Love” [1993c], 18).

Her own personal history of exile —from Cuba, but even more importantly, from the methodologies and sympathies of Romance philology— also provides a key to understanding and measuring her deep impact in the field of Ibero-Medieval studies. Though she, like Auerbach, ended her career at Yale, her story of studying at Penn was also a claim to a genealogy of scholars that led her back to the eminent Hispanist Samuel G. Armistead, who taught there between 1968-82, and through him, to the Romance philologist

Américo Castro, his professor at Princeton in the early 1950s. It was Castro, a student of Ramón Menéndez Pidal, who first introduced in a detailed and sustained way the thesis that Iberian history can only be properly understood as the product of the contact, conflict, and cohabitation—or *convivencia*—of all of its different religious communities, Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Castro's thesis, developed while in exile from Spain at the end of the 1940s and throughout the 1950s, challenged the traditional historiography that he believed had served to buttress the claims of the nationalist government in Spain, above all the notion of a "pure" Spanish identity that predated the Christian struggle in the "reconquest" of Muslim al-Andalus. María Rosa saw her place in the Academy as one of elaborating and spreading Castro's radical insights.

This link with Castro was as much an affinity of methodology as it was one of subject matter and argument. It is, on the one hand, striking to note the many similarities between Castro and Erich Auerbach: both were trained as Romance philologists, both wrote from exile, both argued against an overly "scientific" methodology in the writing of history and the study of literature, both confronted, almost simultaneously, the excesses of nationalism through their scholarship. On the other, María Rosa's own links to Auerbach and Castro are essential to understand her work and ideas, from her focus on Jewish, Christian, and Muslim cultures to her opposition to the myths of national traditions and "pure" literary genealogies (be they "Western" or "Spanish" or "modern"), to her perennial focus on exile, to her deep commitment to narrative historiography and her firm opposition to any pretensions to overly "scientific" or detached scholarship.

María Rosa's work was abundant and far-reaching, and included eight books and over fifty articles, chapters, and published lectures (and many of these republished or translated), ranging across topics as diverse as Provençal etymology (1982a, 1984a), the *Cantar de Mio Cid* (2009b-c), Dante's *Divina Commedia* (1991a, 2004b, 2004f), the Italian language (1983a, 1985b, 1991c), the French *chante-fable* known as *Aucassin et Nicolette* (1989a), lyric poetry from al-Andalus to Provence (1981a, 1987a, 1988b, 1993c, 1994a, 1996a), frame tales such as *Sendebâr* and *El Conde Lucanor* (1991e, 1995c), the



translation movements of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Toledo (2006h-i, 2008a, 2008d), the poetry of Iberian Jews (1997b, 2006k, 2010a), Ramon Llull (1990b), *Don Quijote* (1999b, 2003h), professional hockey (1998b), Walter Benjamin (2003f), Jorge Luis Borges (1991a), Juan Goytisolo (2001b), and the rock-and-roll lyrics of Eric Clapton and Bob Dylan (1988d, 1994a, 2000b). In her many book reviews, which took on again and again the distortions she perceived as so deeply embedded in most history and criticism of medieval literature, one can palpably feel her urgency in arguing against entrenched views of canonicity and what properly constitutes “Spanish” literature or “Western” traditions. María Rosa’s over thirty years of scholarship and writing—which was always unorthodox, often polemical, never flagging in its passion—were dedicated to the tasks of redefining the accepted parameters of medieval studies, of encouraging its development in new directions through multilingual and multi-religious comparison, and of forestalling its return to engrained Eurocentric, Christian-centric, and Castilian-centric habits and paradigms of thought.

It is in this light that we can understand her first book, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage* (1987a, 2004a, and Arabic translation 1999a), which aimed to expose and counter the intractable provincialism and severe myopia she found in the work of many medievalists—Hispanists and Arabists alike—especially with regard to the interaction of Romance and non-Romance literatures and cultures. For example, calling vehemently for the reassessment of the “Arabic role” in medieval European culture and development, she argues that study of medieval Andalusī *muwashshahāt*, or strophic songs in Arabic or Hebrew, must accompany any attempt to discuss the final *envoi* verses, known as *kharjas*, which sometimes showed elements of Romance speech and vocabulary. Similarly, she argues that discussion of medieval courtly love and the poems of the Provençal Troubadours must include debate over the impact of such Andalusī songs in the north. Through these and other case studies, she confronts what she sees as the “myth of Westernness” that distorts our study of the medieval Mediterranean and our understanding of the history of medieval Europe. This was an argument that she would develop and refine until the end of her

career, and it yielded a final flowering in her last books, the co-authored *The Arts of Intimacy: Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Making of Castilian Culture* (2008a) and her introduction and notes to Burton Raffel's new English rendering of the *Cid* (2009b-c).

Her impulse to redefine both the scope and the method of Ibero-Medieval studies—to connect it to a vision of Arabic and Jewish cultures not forgotten beneath the post-medieval biases of national identity and language—reached its high-water mark in the co-edited *The Literature of al-Andalus*, volume five of the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* (2000a), which worked to envision Andalusi culture in broad terms that transcended traditional linguistic and religious categories. With these works, María Rosa succeeded in changing the accepted (and conceivable) historical and critical paradigms within which many medievalists work. A job market that seeks candidates in medieval Iberian “literatures”, and in which some knowledge of Hebrew or Arabic is welcomed as an asset for a Hispanomedievalist rather than weighed as a liability, is a long way from the segregated and conservative professional world lambasted by María Rosa in the 1980s. It is not an exaggeration to say that the acceptance of this more capacious view of medieval literature into the mainstream of the field over the last two decades is attributable in no small measure to María Rosa's far-reaching vision and dogged persistence in stating her case.

One of the most notable features of María Rosa's body of work is precisely the wide impact it achieved. Not only was María Rosa a fellow of the Medieval Academy of America and an invited lecturer at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, the American University in Cairo, Tel Aviv University, as well as at universities in China, Turkey, Spain, and across the United States. She was also a contributor to numerous non-academic publications, and her work includes articles and opinion pieces in the *New York Times* (2002c), the Canadian literary journal *Descant* (2001b), the French magazine *Qantara* (2001a), the Spanish literary journal *Quimera* (1988c, 1997a, 1998a), and various others, as well as interviews on various shows on National Public Radio (2002e-f).



Of all of her writing, none reached more readers and had more influence worldwide than her popular history *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (2002b), which has been translated into eleven languages, including Arabic, Turkish, Japanese, and Indonesian, as well as the languages of Europe, and which is also currently in production as a documentary film. Beginning with the story of the exile of Abd al-Raḥmān I, who fled the ‘Abbasid revolution to Al-Andalus, and following Iberian history all the way to the writing of *Don Quixote* and beyond—including a postscript on the amazing rescue of the medieval Iberian manuscript of the Sarajevo Haggadah during the Balkan war of 1990s—this work offers a distillation of María Rosa’s vision of medieval Iberian cultural history expressed in the grand style of Auerbach and Castro.

Although *The Ornament of the World* was occasionally faulted by some academic readers who found it too romantic or too imprecise in its historical narrative, it would be a mistake to think that María Rosa wrote it unaware of the implications of her tone or methodology. She knew very well that her personal approach and narrative style were not orthodox, but she believed that these were both the most honest and the most socially meaningful ways to pursue research about the past. Viewed in the context of her other work and her trajectory as a whole, it is clear that she constructed *The Ornament of the World* both to undermine the polarized opposition of Islam and Western culture in the popular imagination, and also as a explicit challenge to academic medievalists to make their work less hermetic and more relevant to readers beyond the narrow trammels of medievalist scholarship. As she said in a lecture delivered during the period she was working on the book, “it is up to us, to the medievalists...to play the crucial role of restoring the faith of our society in the Academy’s traditional responsibility to provide intellectual leadership of a compelling public nature”. (“Writing without Footnotes” [2001c], 6). One would be very hard pressed to find another single work that has done more to generate popular interest and support for the study of medieval Iberia than this. Whether one agrees with her interpretations of history and literature or not, one cannot deny that her

work has raised the profile of Ibero-Medieval studies worldwide, and for this we should all —Hispanists, Latinists, Arabists, Hebraists, philologists, historians, and comparatists alike— recognize that we are profoundly in her debt.

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The rain in Seville has finally stopped and the sun has returned, and so I set off to visit the Alcázar palace and gardens. As I wander its paths and lose myself in its repose, my mind turns again to María Rosa, how she loved this place and its history so deeply. Looking at the garden's sculpted perfection, constructed and remodeled since the sixteenth century atop medieval foundations, I see layer upon layer of nostalgia and memory, buried betrayals and murders and illicit loves, incalculable labors to forge perfection out of a partly preserved, partly imagined past. Listening to the forlorn and timeless murmur of the fountains, I recall a lyrical (and almost mystical) remark that María Rosa made in a 2007 tribute essay about her close friend Harold Bloom: "There is only one kind of relationship to be had with literature, if we are to be critics true to what we pretend to write about: full-out and no holds barred, it must always be assuming it will be True Love, and we will be able to find its name and say it" ("How I learned" [2007a], 485).

If I try to read as she did—and as she tried to teach me to do—and if I try to see as she saw, recognizing what is foreign within the most intimate and proximate, and not pretending to be able to see the past entirely apart from the unfolding present, I can understand why exile and loss and pain and remembrance were so important to all that she set out to tell us: Because, for María Rosa, there is no relationship to anything —be it history, or poetry, or memory, or identity— that is legitimate or true unless it is first of all through the heart. For it is the heart that allows us to sympathize with the past, to identify with it and understand its complexity, rather than merely to dissect and measure it and believe we have exhausted it through observation and description. To take such an iconoclastic view as hers —which is, properly speaking, the same unscientific, Romantic view embraced in one way or another by Castro and Auerbach— is, of course, to make ourselves



vulnerable, “to open oneself to the barbs of the Philistines, especially when the Philistines are our colleagues” (485). But it is also to open ourselves to a beauty and understanding that go beyond scholarship, and without which scholarship can have no meaning.

It was by opening herself to this truth that María Rosa worked and lived, and it is by opening myself to it that I best remember her. She often expressed what this meant to her through the words of the thirteenth-century Andalusī mystic Ibn ‘Arabī, which as far as I can see are among the words she cited most often in her work, including them repeatedly in her essays and books between 1985 and 2011. I believe Ibn ‘Arabī’s words served as a sort of mantra that epitomized her own relationship to medieval Iberia, a relationship that was “full-out and no holds barred”, that was without bounds or canons or national borders, a relationship of love strong enough to endure beyond any exile:

My heart can take on  
Any form:  
Gazelles in a meadow,  
A cloister for monks,  
For the idols, sacred ground,  
Kaaba for the circling pilgrim,  
The tables of a Torah,  
The scrolls of the Qur’ān.  
I profess the religion of love;  
Wherever its caravan turns  
Along the way, that is the belief,  
The faith I keep. (cited in “Remembering John” [2011a], 85).

Thank you, María Rosa, for sharing your faith and love with us. Though we have lost you, we still hear your voice, and our hearts will not forget.

—Seville, November 2012

NB: this bibliography follows a modified MLA format. All entries reflect MLA style, but the works are arranged in sections (Dissertation, Authored Books, Edited Books, Articles and Chapters, Translations, Published Lectures, Reviews, and Selected Interviews). Translations and reprints are listed immediately following the original item and each section moves in chronological order toward the present. The year of each publication appears in brackets before each entry and the letters a, b, c, etc. have been used to distinguish multiple entries in a single year, according to the order in which they appear here.

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