

SOLOMON IBN GABIROL:  
AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET



HIS METAPHYSICS emerge from desire: his ethics evolve to a science of sense. What begins there in wisdom ends in anger: what was anger gives way to a grace. He is a poet of poles and swells and reversals, of splits that propose a completion. He is the most modern of the Hebrew medievals, the most foreign to a modernist approach. In his verse what looks like a mirror is meant in fact to be passed through: transparency marks a divide. Hebrew is Arabic, Muslim Jewish, his resistance a form of embrace.

ABU AYYUB SULAIMAN IBN YAHYA IBN JABIRUL

The reconstructed facts are few. He is born Shelomoh Ben Yehudah Ibn Gabirol, in either 1021 or 1022, in Malaga, to an undistinguished family that may have fled the collapsing capital of the Umayyad Caliphate, Córdoba, with the same wave of refugees that included Shmuel Ha-Nagid, who would go on to become the period's first great Hebrew poet. At some point his father moves the family north to Saragossa, and Ibn Gabirol—or, in Arab circles, Abu Ayyub Sulaiman Ibn Yahya Ibn Jabirul—is raised in that important center of Islamic and Jewish learning. Ibn Gabirol's father dies while the precocious son is still in his early teens, and the young man is looked after by a Jewish notable at the Saragossan court, Yequtiel Ibn Hasan al-Mutawakkil Ibn Qabrun. He is writing accomplished poems by age sixteen, important ones by nineteen, though he is ill, already afflicted with the disease that will leave him embittered and in constant pain, suffering from boils that scholars reason were caused by tuberculosis of the skin (the actual condition has never been precisely identified). We can also infer from his poems that he was short and ugly. In 1039 Yequtiel gets mixed up in court intrigue and is killed, and Ibn Gabirol loses his patron. He leaves Saragossa sometime after 1045, when his mother dies, and most scholars assume that he goes south, to Granada, in order to try his luck at the court of HaNagid, who is, at that point, governor (nagid) of the region's Jews, prime minister of that Muslim *ta'ifa* (party state) under its Berber king, and commander-in-chief

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

of the Granadan army. Things appear to work out for a time, but wires get crossed, or the young, upstart poet insults his elder poet-patron, and even this meager trail vanishes, with Ibn Gabirol still in his mid-twenties. He is known, says Moshe Ibn Ezra, author of the age's most important work of Hebrew literary criticism, *The Book of Discussion and Remembrance*, for his philosophical temperament, and for his "angry spirit which held sway over reason, and his demon within which he could not control."

He writes secular verse, often gnarled with ambition and anger, and it is probable that later in life he is supported by his writing for the synagogue, composing radical and, in comparison with his court-centered verse, remarkably self-deprecating *piyyutim*, or liturgical poems, for the weekday, Sabbath, and festival services. Apart from his diwan and his philosophical masterwork, *The Fountain of Life*, he produces a short but striking ethical treatise, *On the Improvement of the Moral Qualities*, and claims in one of his poems to have written some twenty books—now lost—on philosophical, linguistic, scientific, and religious topics. (*A Choice of Pearls*, a volume of proverbs, is often attributed to him, but it is a bland gathering, hardly in keeping with the rest of his extraordinary oeuvre; and while other medieval authorities quote his biblical commentary, no mention of a collection survives.)

"Arrogant, orphaned, itinerant," in Allen Mandelbaum's characterization, he dies, says Ibn Ezra, in Valencia, not yet forty. His religious poems now form part of the regular prayer service in Jewish communities throughout the world, and downtown Tel Aviv traffic jams take place on a street that bears his name.

BEZALEL

"Shelter me in your shadow," he writes, "be with my mouth and its word."

The vocabulary of Jewish *poesis*, or making, goes back to a crisis of refuge and interior design. It has always been cultic, just as its ethos has most often been abstract, at a certain remove from the figure. Where the much more talked-about and vatic abstraction derives from the ambiguous second commandment, itself an extension of the first, "I am the Lord thy God: Do not make idols or likenesses," the more modest if not maligned ornamental idiom comes from the scriptural role played by Bezalel Ben Uri, of the tribe of Judah, whose God-given task was to build

#### AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

and outfit the desert Sanctuary, “to adorn Him.” He was to construct the Ark and the Tabernacle, to fashion the curtains and cast the candlesticks that the midrash tells us baffled the more pedantic Moses. Bezalel saw to the loops and the veils and the sockets—the altar, the court, and the laver. Even the priestly vestments. His name means “in the shadow of God, the son of my light (or ‘fire’),” and Exodus 31:2 says that he was “filled . . . with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, in all manner of workmanship . . . of the craftsman, and of the skilful workman, and of the weaver in colors.”

Like the Bezalel of Scripture and midrash, and like King Solomon his successor and the poet’s namesake, who built the Temple and composed the most beautiful and wisest of biblical books, Ibn Gabirol would charge his ornament with complex value, bringing sublime vision to a space that artifice defined. Lacing his poems with allusions to the work of these forbears, he would devote his skill to the pursuit of wisdom and the evocation of magnitude.

#### CORRIDORS: CLUES

Scriptural figures apart, key precursors and contemporaries include:

the blind and reclusive Syrian ascetic poet Abu ’l-’Ala al-Ma’arri (974–1058), known for the dense patterning of his caustic poems, like Ibn Gabirol’s, at once “boundless and self-contained.” After beginning as a conventional poet working in the court modes, “milking the udders of time,” in his *Luzumu ma la Yalzam* (The Necessity of What Isn’t Necessary) Abu ’l-’Ala sets out against the grain of the poetry of his day and its neo-Aristotelian motto—the most pleasing poetry is the most feigning—and seeks “to speak the truth”: “You stand there as the driven / wheels of heaven spin / and choose, / while the fates are laughing”;

Abu al-Hakim al-Karmaani, a prominent scholar (born in Córdoba, d. 1066) who, after his travels in the East, introduced to Saragossa the doctrine of the tenth-century *Ikhwaan As-Safa’*, The Brethren of Purity. Their ecumenical, encyclopedic *Epistles* were read throughout the Muslim world and played an important role in the rise of Sufism. In the world of the *Epistles*, the pattern of the whole is always represented in the pattern of the parts: man is a microcosm, and correspondences exist between astronomical, ethical, and social planes. The sciences there are treated not as ends in themselves, so much as vehicles by which mankind gains awareness of the harmonies and beauty of the universe. When a new

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

edition of the *Epistles* appears in the first half of the eleventh century, it makes its way to Andalusia where, within months, it is circulating among the Islamic scholars, and also reaches Ibn Gabirol;

Abu Muhammad ‘Ali Ibn Hazm (994–1064), the harem-raised Córdoba theologian-poet, perhaps the most vigorous and representative Muslim thinker of the period. Ibn Hazm is best known for his *Ring of the Dove*, a psychologically astute treatise detailing the signs and stages of love, but he is also the author of a vast work on comparative religion and at least one qasida that recalls Ibn Gabirol’s greatest poem, *Kingdom’s Crown*. Also reminiscent of Ibn Gabirol is Ibn Hazm’s moral essay, *A Philosophy of Character and Conduct*: “I am a man who has always been uneasy about the impermanency and constant instability of fortune. . . . In my investigations I have constantly tried to discover an end in human actions which all men unanimously hold as good and which they all seek. I have found only this: the one aim of escaping anxiety. . . . [A]s I investigated, I observed that all things tended to elude me, and I reached the conclusion that the only permanent reality possible consists in good works useful for another, immortal life” (trans. Kritzeck);

the unnamed poets mentioned by Moshe Ibn Ezra in *The Book of Discussion and Remembrance*: Ibn Gabirol’s “way in the art of poetry was subtle,” says Ibn Ezra, “like that of the later Muslim poets,” referring perhaps to the major “modern” Arabic writers—poets of the “new,” ornamental (*badii‘a*) style, such as the ninth-century innovator Muslim Ibn Walid and the master mannerist Abu Tamaam, and perhaps to the metaphysical Saragossa circle as well.

ON the Hebrew side of the ledger, one counts among Ibn Gabirol’s predecessors and peers the aforementioned Shmuel Ben Yosef Halevi HaNagid, the major Jewish cultural and political figure of his day. Ibn Gabirol contacts HaNagid when the former is sixteen years old and the latter at the height of his several powers. The young poet writes him at length, in verse, initially from Saragossa, singing the vizier’s praises, and setting the stage for their somewhat mysterious confrontation and falling out several years later in Granada;

hovering in the background is the ongoing influence of several key figures: Sa‘adiah Gaon, the great Eastern rabbi, leader of Babylonian Jewry in the first half of the tenth century, translator of the Bible into Arabic, redactor of the first standard prayer book, liturgical poet, compiler of the first rhyming dictionary in Hebrew and the first Hebrew–

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

Arabic lexicon, and author of *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, which includes modern-sounding, “scientific” chapters on money, children, eroticism, eating and drinking, and the satisfaction of the thirst for revenge. It was Sa’adiah’s student Dunash Ben Labrat who introduced Arabic poetry’s secular genres and quantitative meters into Hebrew in the middle of the tenth century and set off a debate that split the Jewish intellectual community: Dunash was accused of desecrating the holy tongue with his importation of an alien poetic, and his work was attacked. Things turned nasty, and Dunash’s primary rival, an older and more experienced court-poet named Menahem Ibn Saruq, fell out of favor with the principal Jewish patron of the day, Hasdai Ibn Shaprut, and was thrown into prison. The new spirit of rationalism and innovation took hold in Hasdai’s court, which, in turn, was modeled on the Córdoba court of the Caliph ‘Abd ar-Rahman III, where Hasdai served as a senior physician, customs director, and personal envoy for the caliph.

In the small body of his work that has come down to us, however, where he seems to have handled the new forms awkwardly, Dunash was more innovator than master, and it turns out that credit for the qualitative lyric breakthrough rightfully belongs to his wife, whose name we do not know. In a marvelous 1984 discovery, scholar Ezra Fleischer identified a single extant work of hers in the papers of the Cairo Genizah; this short poem to her husband (who also appears to have quarreled with Hasdai) is, says Fleischer, the first realized personal poem in the post-biblical Hebrew canon:

Will her love remember his graceful doe,  
her only son in her arms as he parted?  
On her left hand he placed a ring from his right,  
on his wrist she placed her bracelet.

As a keepsake she took his mantle from him,  
and he in turn took hers from her.  
He won’t settle in the land of Spain,  
though its prince give him half his kingdom.

Other echoing voices include the popular tenth-century liturgical poet and teacher Yitzhak Ibn Mar Sha’ul, of Lucena, who took up Dunash’s prosodic innovations and reportedly was the first Hebrew poet to write of the “gazelle,” the young, male love interest in so many of the erotic poems of the period; his central claim to fame lay in his penitential

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

poetry, particularly his petition, “Lord, Do Not Judge Me for What I Have Done,” which entered the liturgy in many communities and finds direct echoes in *Kingdom’s Crown*;

the powerful, prolific, and somewhat reactionary liturgical poet Yosef Ibn Abitur (c. 950–after 1024), legendary for having “interpreted” the Talmud for the Andalusian Caliph al-Hakim II (whose Córdoba library of some 400,000 volumes was the largest collection of books in Europe at the time). His poems for the synagogue often dealt vividly with religious-nationalist themes, especially that of exile, and he was also famous for his mystical poems of angelology, which were to have a marked influence on Ibn Gabirol. Ibn Abitur’s lone innovation was major: he was the first poet to develop the lyrical preludes, or *reshuyot*, to hitherto neglected parts of the Sabbath and festival morning liturgy. The genre would go on to figure prominently in the work of the great poets of the period, with Ibn Gabirol counted as the first master of this quintessentially Andalusian form;

Ibn Abitur’s contemporary, the first exclusively “professional” and secular Hebrew poet of the period, Yitzhak Ibn Khalfon, who was born in North Africa and raised in Córdoba in the latter third of the tenth century. Ibn Khalfon eventually set out as an itinerant poet, writing eulogies and other poems for Jewish patrons in Spain, North Africa, and even far-off Damascus. The outstanding member of the second generation of the new Hebrew poetry, he greatly widened the tonal and prosodic range of that verse, above all adding a personal, graceful and often comic dimension to its rhetoric;

and, finally, Ibn Gabirol was surrounded and no doubt influenced by a contemporary Saragossan Who’s Who of Jewish intellectuals that included the poet-linguist Yosef Ibn Hasdai, author of a single extant poem, known as the “Orphaned [unique] Qasida,” an erotically charged, petitionary encomium dedicated to his lifelong friend, Shmuel HaNagid, and looked upon as a model of its kind by many of the Andalusian Hebrew poets; the sharp-tongued, learned, and promising satirical poet, Moshe Ibn al-Taqaana, killed in his twenties when a wall fell on him along the Toledo Road; and one of the leading linguists of the age, Yonah Ibn Janaah, author of the important *Book of Roots* and, along with Ibn al-Taqaana, an outspoken detractor of HaNagid.

“NEXT to Ibn Gabirol,” however, proclaimed the thirteenth-century author Yehudah al-Harizi, with characteristic hyperbole and, it would seem,

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

without full knowledge of HaNagid's output, the previous poets were "only wind and emptiness."

DEATHS, DIWANS, DETECTIVES

The better part of his social life seems to have been spent making enemies, and the payback wasn't long in coming. Ibn Ezra tells us that after Ibn Gabirol's death—scholars have established the correct date as 1054, 1058, or 1070, with the middle figure being most probable—after his death, or deaths, his reputation came under assault and his work was criticized "by pedants" for assorted flaws, much as happened with the work of HaNagid after he died in 1056. "The poet sings," wrote Jacob Glatstein in a Yiddish poem some nine hundred years later, "the Jewish coffin-birds snap."

The medieval snip, it would seem, was equal to its snap, for the secular poems of both Andalusian poets came to similar fates: seldom copied and, on the whole, forgotten for reasons personal and political (fundamentalist Muslim invasion from the south, Christian reconquest in the north, with subsequent expulsion of the Jews), they were relegated to that underground nexus through which strong marginal poetry is often passed on. In HaNagid's case only fragments circulated, and a sixteenth-century copy of his collected poems, or diwan, surfaced in a crate in early twentieth-century Syria, though it wasn't published in an edition the general reader might absorb for another thirty years. The case of Ibn Gabirol is more complex, and in some ways even more fabulous. While many of his liturgical poems were taken up by communities throughout the Jewish world and preserved in prayer books, the nonliturgical poems were harder to come by and clearly not in great demand. Nor, prior to the discovery of the Cairo Genizah and its scrap heap of Scripture, scrolls, shopping lists, recipes, letters, and assorted literary gems, was there any mention of a complete diwan of Ibn Gabirol's poems. When German scholars in the mid-nineteenth century sought to assemble a selection of the poet's work, the material had to be pieced together from manuscripts held in libraries in Oxford, Parma, Vienna, St. Petersburg, and elsewhere. The texts were sometimes in poor condition, and the overall picture was hard to construct.

Enter an Iraqi Jewish writer by the name of David Tzemah, who tells his story in a 1931 letter to David Yellin, a Jerusalem scholar who was preparing an edition of another of the Hebrew Spanish poets. Tzemah, it

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

appears, was aware of a family legend about an important manuscript of medieval poetry that had once been belonged to a certain eminent forebear but had been lost during that relative's lifetime, toward the middle of the nineteenth century. His curiosity piqued, Tzemah-the-younger set out in search of the lost manuscript. He wrote to all his Iraqi relatives, traveled to remote villages, but came up empty-handed. Ten years passed, he says, with neither rest nor repose. Finally he decided to become an antiquarian bookseller, on the outside chance that in this way he might some day come across his treasure! He announced himself in synagogues and to other booksellers, stating his readiness to buy old manuscripts any time and any place, but nothing turned up, and Tzemah came to despair of ever finding the legendary manuscript. Either it had been destroyed, lay tattered in a genizah, or else, he reasoned, it was not in Iraq.

One day, he continues, he was walking on his way, headed for the celebration of a *brit milah*, a circumcision, where he himself was to do the honors—a group of children were singing behind him, as was done in that part of the world, he notes for Yellin—when a woman began calling out to him. She had heard that the good scholar bought old books, and she had some; perhaps the honorable gentleman would like to see them. Tzemah explained that he couldn't come now, as he was expected at the *brit*, but his servant would go with her and see where she lived, and then bring him by later on. And so, after the ceremony and the meal that followed, his servant brought him to the woman's house. Tzemah climbed up to the attic where the "old books" were stacked, but found only dusty Pentateuchs, Psalters, and prayer books. Nothing of interest to an antiquarian. "I came down from the attic," he wrote, in his precise, if somewhat odd and old-fashioned Hebrew, "I and my servant, to return to my house, when I saw the kitchen open before me. A big pot of water was set out for the laundry and beside it was a basket of papers, all of them what looked to be old scraps, to feed the fire and heat the pot. I asked her: What is *that*? And she said: Tomorrow is our day for the laundry and we'll get up early to prepare the fire. I said to her: When will you people be done with this awful practice? Perhaps there are sacred writings among them. She said: We have already checked them. They don't contain any print. Anyway, what can I do? I want to rent the attic and I need the space. The books are for sale; the papers—for the fire."

"I approached the basket to see what it held, and there among the papers was the manuscript I'd been searching for all these years! How can

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

I describe for you, good sir, that instant upon which I beheld both life and death at once, that moment which resembled the revelation at Mount Sinai! And here I was, the final redeemer among the sons of the sons of that righteous man! I could have taken the manuscript for nothing, but in my delight I gave her a proper reward.”

In his hands Tzemah now held a seventeenth-century manuscript containing more than four thousand poems, nearly complete diwans of Ibn Gabirol, Moshe Ibn Ezra, Yehuda Halevi, Todros Abulafia, and selections from other minor but important poets from Spain, Provence, and the Near East—which is to say, a sizable share of medieval Hebrew poetry’s greatest works, all of it literally snatched from the fire. Its lineage was spelled out within it as well: it had been copied in Egypt, then brought to Iraq, Bombay, and then back to Iraq. Tzemah’s letter goes on in similar fashion, telling of his attempts to find a buyer for the manuscript who would issue the books in accessible editions, and of the eventual sale to a Viennese antiquarian whose partner came to Baghdad to see him. The partner lit his cigarette, Tzemah explained that he preferred the narghila (“Had not the gentlemen read his ‘Song of the Narghila?’”), they hit it off, and the promise of publication was confirmed, though nothing had yet come of the pledge, Tzemah observes, as he closes: “But I must cut this letter short, for the postman is about to depart. . . . Here is the address of Benjamin the buyer and his partner in Vienna. And David sends blessings to David, [signed] David Ben Salmaan Tzemah.”

EMBRACING EVASION: THE EXOTIC

Perhaps the primary obstacle facing the contemporary reader of medieval Hebrew poetry is the overstuffed critical baggage of its ornament, which the textbooks would have us drag about on our way from line to line and poem to poem. Again and again the poetry is described as decorative or ornamental, without our ever stopping to ask what that means. The tacit assumption of modern art-talk is that ornament is unnecessary or quaint (domesticating). Baroque theories of the fold notwithstanding, we think of it often as fluff, or a lie. “Arabesque,” for Ezra Pound, was the ultimate put down, the representative figure of evasion and flight from the real. “The world is still deceived with ornament,” we hear in the *Merchant of Venice*, at the heart of another age of embellishment. “Thus ornament is but the gilded shore to a most dangerous sea . . . the seeming truth which cunning times put on to entrap the wisest.” Also prominent in the anti-

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

ornament camp is Adolf Loos's equation of "Ornament and Crime," as the title of his 1908 essay on the subject has it, and his saying elsewhere that "the less civilized a people is, the more prodigal it will be with ornament and decoration. . . . The Red Indian within us," he urges, "must be overcome."

There are, however, less mechanical or reductive ways to think about ornament. The apocryphal book of Ben Sira says: "To a sensible man education is like a golden ornament, and like a bracelet worn on the right arm," a reasonably familiar sentiment. But then it says: "A mind settled on an intelligent thought is like the stucco decoration on the wall of a colonnade" (22:17), already a much more interesting notion.

For the phenomenon is cosmetic, though in saying so we unwittingly arrive at the root and truth of the matter, the complex of definitions that accrue around the Greek word for the verbal form of the term, *kosmein*, that is, to order, and, secondarily, to ornament. It is from this cluster of meanings that we get our "ordered world," "a cosmos," as in the pseud-epigraphic *Prayer of Manasseh*: "He who made the heaven and the earth with all their embellishment [*kosmo*]. . . ." Which returns us to Bezalel and the sanctuary designed to "adorn Him."

Several modern writers who look at ornament in the visual arts and without condescension bring us closer still to the heart of the matter. The art historian A. K. Coomaraswamy traces the development of the word in Sanskrit, Greek, and English, from cult to court and on to the swamp of pretension and the dismissal of "arts and crafts." At the outset, he notes, ornament was "that which makes a thing itself"; and *ornamentum* in Ecclesiastical law didn't convey superfluous decoration, but the *equipment* of the sacred service. Discussing the various words used in traditional art-theory to express the phenomenon he says: "Most of these words, which imply for us the notion of something adventitious and luxurious, . . . originally implied a completion or fulfillment of the artifact or other object in question [. . . with a view to proper operation] . . . until . . . the art by which the thing itself had been made whole began to mean only a sort of millinery or upholstery that covered over a body that had not been made by 'art' but rather by 'labor'."

And Oleg Grabar states in *The Mediation of Ornament*: "Ornament is, to coin a word . . . calliphoric: it carries beauty with it." Echoing Coomaraswamy he observes that the words used to express the act involved in ornamentation imply "the successful completion of an act, of an object, or even of a state of mind or soul." He notes the daemonic, intermediary

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

nature of ornament, and its extraordinary capacity as part of the work of art to shape our lives and thought, to question meaning with the pleasure it channels, or to use that pleasure to cultivate meaning and intensify relation to value.

All of this might be summed up in the artist-craftsman Eric Gill's saying that "a pendant on the neck is useful and possibly more so than a trouser button."

The issue's relevance comes into focus when we look at one of the most conspicuous ornaments in medieval Hebrew literature, the kind of biblical allusion that has come to be known as *shibbutz*, which means "setting" or "inlay," whereby elements of the biblical text are woven through the "fabric" of the verse. In that nineteenth-century term, a parallel to the German for "mosaic style," we have a classic case of distortion in East–West transmission, a failure of sympathy. For the term itself, *shibbutz*, implies an effect that is static while the use of biblical phrasing was brought over, in part, from Arabic literature, where it was based on the Quran and was known as *iqtibas*, "the lighting of one flame from another." It implied a source and transfer of energy. Far from constituting a rote application to an otherwise useful but plain poetic surface, biblical quotation and the other ornaments of this poetry act like tiny turbines to the current of the verse, thousands of finely constructed stations-of-power set out along its flow.

Apart from quotation, what do we mean here by ornament? Nearly everything that contributes to the unparaphrasable weave of the writing—alliteration, assonance, irony, metaphor, rhetorical and rhythmic effects, manipulations of tone—the ceremonial equipment of the verse that makes it a poem and not a theme: "The little weddings between the words," as Israeli novelist Dan Tsalka has put it. All that's exotic to reduction's impulse.

THE FOUNTAIN

Diwans weren't the only thing that vanished in the course of the Ibn Gabirol saga, and Tzemah not the only detective involved. At one point the poet's name turned up missing as well. . . .

In 1846 the French scholar Solomon Munk discovered among the Hebrew manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris excerpts of a philosophical work by Ibn Gabirol that had been translated by the thirteenth-century Jewish writer Shem Tob Falaqera. The work bore a

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

suspicious resemblance to sections of *Fons Vitae* (The Fountain of Life), a Latin text by the philosopher known variously as Avicebrol, Avincebrol, Avicebron, and Albenzubron—believed to have been a Muslim or a Christian—which Munk knew from quotations in Albertus Magnus’s *De causis et processu universitatis*. (As it turned out, he would soon find the entire Latin manuscript of Avicebron’s work in the same library.) Studying and comparing the two manuscripts, Munk was able to determine that the Falaqera was made up of excerpts from a (still) lost Arabic original, of which Avicebron’s Latin was a complete translation. Munk then put the remaining pieces of the puzzle together, and on 12 November of the same year he announced that the great Christian/Muslim philosopher Avicebron was none other than the Jewish poet Solomon Ibn Gabirol, his name having undergone the Latinizing mutation that turned Ibn Sinna into Avicenna and Ibn Rushd into Averroes.

Written in the universalist spirit of the times, and, scholars speculate, very late in the poet’s life, Ibn Gabirol’s work had, a century after his death, been rendered into Latin by a team of two working in Archbishop Raymond’s Toledo translation center. Sitting at a table in a room with other translators, as was the common practice, the Jewish convert Ibn Daud, whose Christian name was Johannes Hispanus, read from the Arabic and translated orally into Spanish, and then Dominicus Gundissalinus, the Archdeacon of Segovia, translated from Hispanus’s spoken Spanish into a written Latin. The volume that came of that project was to play a key role in European intellectual history, and one important French scholar has gone so far as to say that a knowledge of thirteenth-century European philosophy is impossible without an understanding of *Fons Vitae* and its influence. Guillaume d’Auvergne, the mid-thirteenth-century Bishop of Paris, declared that the author of *Fons Vitae* was the “most exalted of all the philosophers.” Something in the work obviously held a strong appeal for these Christian thinkers, much as it appealed later on to the work’s leading champion, the Franciscan scholastic Duns Scotus, “of reality the rarest-veined unraveller,” as Gerard Manley Hopkins has it.

But the very elements that appealed to Duns Scotus and other Neoplatonist Christians may have doomed it within the Jewish community, where interests and methods grew less “universal” as social circumstances changed in Spain and the Christian reconquest gathered strength. With the exception of its title, which is drawn from Psalms 36:10, “For with Thee is the fountain [source] of life (*meqor hayyim*); In Thy light

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

do we see light,” the book contains not a single reference to Hebrew Scripture or tradition, and Plato is the only philosopher mentioned there by name. Perhaps the key mediating force in *Fons Vitae*, the Divine Will, was too close for Jewish comfort to the Christian Logos. Scholars have suggested that this, in combination with its total independence from Jewish dogma, prompted the Jewish neglect over time. (“The odor of heresy . . . clung to its author,” says one commentator.) In any event, whatever influence it may have had was soon dispersed by the less threatening and much more conservative Aristotelian philosophy of Maimonides.

The following miniature anthology from *The Fountain of Life* might serve as an aperitif to the whole of Ibn Gabirol’s philosophical system:

If you raise yourself up to the Primary Universal Matter and take shelter in its shadow, you will see wonders more sublime than all. Desire, therefore, for this and seek, for this is the purpose for which the human soul was formed and this is the most tremendous pleasure and the greatest of all forms of happiness (III:57);



Matter has no reality apart from its form, for the real derives from form, and therefore matter moves toward the reception of form, in other words, to be released from the sorrow of absence to the pleasure of existence (V:29);



*Student:* What is the proof that the motion of matter and the other substances is desire and love? *Master:* Because it is apparent that desire and love are nothing but an effort to join the beloved and be united with it, and matter makes an effort to join form; it follows that its movement comes from love and desire for form (V:32);



The creation of all things by the Creator, that is, the emanation of form from the first source, which is to say, the will, and its overflowing across matter resembles the upwelling of water flowing from a fountain and descending . . . except that this flow is unceasing and entirely outside of motion and time . . . And the imprinting of form in matter, when it reaches it from the will, is like the return of the form of one *who is gazing into a mirror* (V:41);



AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

One can compare creation to a word, which man utters with his mouth. In man's expression of the word, its form and meaning are registered upon the hearing of the listener and in his mind. Along the same lines it is said that the exalted and holy creator expresses his word, and its meaning is registered in the substantiality of matter, and matter preserves that meaning, in other words, that created form is imprinted in matter and registered upon it (V:43);



*Master:* The purpose for which all that exists exists [is] the knowledge of the world of the divine. . . . *Student:* And what is the fruit that we will achieve with this study? *Master:* "Release from death and adherence to the fountain and source of life (V:43).

GENTILITY, THE GOOD, THE GOOD LIFE

The second obstacle to the successful transmission of the Hebrew medievals' art: the widely held genteel picture of the court society in which these poems took shape. The textbook version of it comes down to us in Joseph Weiss's 1947 essay, which for fifty years has told students that

the court of the patron serves as a school of advanced studies for the development of superior taste. Its members know no other ideal apart from fineness of form, no finer deed than the exercise of aesthetic tact. Wherever a 'court' exists, there you will find 'style'—nobility, refinement, and linguistic elegance. The pleasures of society, such as play, laughter, music, literature and of course the bonds of love and friendship, all pass through the crucible of subtle stylization until the social life of the court becomes entirely a game of art . . . poetry, song, entertaining rhymes and riddles, laughter, and light, cultured conversation.

Coming to this description directly from a reading of the poems one rubs one's eyes in disbelief: Is *this* the cultural setting that produced the Jewish courtier/poet/Talmudist/prime minister/general Shmuel Ha-Nagid? Where in this scenario is there room for the vigor, wisdom, sublimity, irony, sensuality, and range of emotion and thought in his work? Or for the high stakes and backstabbing intrigue that have characterized court cultures in medieval China, Arabia, and Elizabethan England, and that played a central role in upper-crust Spanish Jewish society as

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

well? Can we truly believe that the Andalusian medieval best and brightest, men of staggering talent and learning, devoted themselves to the world presented in this museum-diorama-like tableau? Weiss, it should be granted, acknowledges HaNagid—who is usually regarded as the courtier-rabbi par excellence—as something of an exception, as his military and civic roles balanced the otherwise “illusory” and one-dimensional world of the politically powerless Jewish court; and the general cultural cheer, he adds, is tempered by the poets’ awareness of the cruel hand of fate, *zeman*, or Time, which undermines their sense of security. But the interaction of these two conventional aspects of existence is, in Weiss’s view, “atomistic”: it results in the atrophy of the poets’ individual personalities.

And we are back where we started: Is *this* the culture that produced Solomon Ibn Gabirol, famous for his early mastery of the lesser literary court conventions and a later reconfiguration of these same conventions that gave us some of the most powerful, personal, mythic, and even antisocial hybrid poetry postbiblical Hebrew has known—to say nothing of his major liturgical verse and his philosophical *Fountain of Life*? (At this point we are already three generations into the period’s poetry, halfway through its Golden Age.)

Clearly something is wrong with this picture. Something recognizably human, something essential to the distinctive, not the typical, poetry of the period is missing in this reconstruction of the social context. The problem is, in fact, more tonal than anything else, a blurring of terms and associations (one shudders to imagine how twentieth-century poetry would look through the telescope of thirtieth-century thumbnail sociology, let alone sociology that focused on a “representative” rather than exceptional poet). For Weiss and others are not wrong to direct the would-be reader of Hebrew-Andalusian verse to the court of the patron, and its poetry does in fact involve a discrete world with its own highly stylized modes of social and poetic behavior. This world is in several respects strange to modern sensibilities and, its lightest verse aside, play was a major part of it—though judging from the poems and prose works of the period, that play seems to have involved less diversion and frippery than an examination of the dynamics of rhetoric and human creation, or re-creation—what T. S. Eliot meant when he said that poetry is “serious amusement,” implying an extra-utile and gratuitous act, which also happens to be the Welsh modernist poet David Jones’s definition of art, or at least of the valid signs, the made things that comprise it.

#### AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

It is true, as well, that our medieval poets sought the support of a patron and all the perks that entailed, and that numerous poems were written for the reasons often spelled out: to make sure one's bread got buttered, to please a friend, to exercise one's gift, to get out a message, to bask in the limelight, and so on. The poets' highest ideal, however, their notion of the good, and by extension, the good life, hardly led to a literary country club of witty conversation, croquet, and afternoon couplets and tea; it was an *otium* opposed to *negotium*, at the heart of which lay the artist's perennial question of leisure, of freedom *from* the business of earning a living, and freedom *for* a "relaxation" of mind into a critical, nourishing entanglement of words and the world. It involved formidable learning, a considerable range of affective and intellectual experience, and a highly demanding, self-conscious, complex art. And it was, for the most part, permeated with a sense of the divine and its textual extension through history.

A strong reading of the poetry that emerged in that environment, then, requires both a more nuanced understanding of the court and its literary conventions, and the abandonment of what pop-cultural critic Gilbert Seldes once called, in another context entirely, "the lorgnettes of prejudice provided by fashion and gentility."

#### HEINRICH HEINE OR THE HISTORY OF TRANSMISSION

Heine was dealing with a similar sort of interference some one hundred and fifty years ago. Working from his Parisian "mattress grave" at the same time as the jigsaw editions of Ibn Gabirol's poems were being assembled and, in part, translated in Germany, and very likely under their spell—also, one can assume, in dialogue with Goethe's *East–West Diwan*—the German Jewish-Protestant poet is in the middle of a longish poem called "Judah Ben Halevy," which would become part of "Hebrew Melodies" (in *Romancero*, a book that was floated on an enormous publicity campaign and sold 15,000 copies in four printings when it was released in 1851, with the first illustrated book jacket in publishing history). He sketches a kind of biography in verse, full of flowery detail about the fourth major Andalusian-Hebrew poet's troubadourlike love songs for Jerusalem and his legendary death there at the hands of a Saracen on horseback. Along the way he inserts a labyrinthine version of Plutarch's story about the fancy box of jewels that Alexander the Great took in his victory over Darius III, a box in which Alexander then put his beloved

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

Homer's poems. Part IV of Heine's poem begins as he breaks off to tell us that his wife wasn't happy with the previous section, because she disapproved of Alexander's behavior (he should have sold the box and bought his wife a cashmere sweater) and, anyway, she'd never heard of this Judah Halevy, whose poems her husband says he would have placed in Darius's box were he given the chance. Keep the box if you must, she implies, but why waste it on an obscure poet's poems? In her view, says Heine, Halevy's work "would have been honored quite enough by being kept in any pretty box of cardboard with some very swanky Chinese arabesques to decorate it, like a bonbon box from Marquis." She and the other students of "the boarding schools of Paris" know about mummies and pharaohs and porcelain pagoda princes, Heine says, "all of this is crammed into them"—but

If you ask them for great figures  
In the golden age of glory  
Of the Arabic Hispanic  
Jewish school of poetry—

If you ask about the trio  
Of Jehuda Ben Halevy  
And of Solomon Gabirol  
And of Moses Ibn Ezra

If you ask about such figures  
Then the children stare back at you  
With their goggling eyes wide open  
Like the cows along a hillside.

*(trans. Hal Draper)*

The poem continues with Heine telling her to go learn Hebrew—a language he himself barely knew.

I, IDEAL

The hyperextension of the particular, the "I," at times, from on high, speaking down to us from the idealized, or up through us toward it, and the hybrid first person of his liturgical poetry, braiding us into the poet's verse, in his turning, like the Psalmist. Often the first person of the poetry takes its place in that ideal landscape, within its palaces and walled gardens. But through almost all of it, or the best of it, a specific individual is

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

speaking, toadlike within these imaginary gardens, where hyperbole yields to an intimacy, and the real to an experienced ideal, or vice versa, in a balance proposed (through language) between the elements, the season, the sexes, and the senses—between the beyond and what's under one's feet. So Ibn Gabirol's poems are cut and set like the jewels that line them—faceted to reflect, include, and raise, even as they coolly dazzle and deny.

The poet, too, becomes both less and more than he is, emptying himself, in part, as he takes on the conventions and typologies of the verse. His Arabic honorific, for example, Abu Ayyub, "Father of Job," is purely formal, the standard *kuniyah* (agnomen) for anyone whose name is Sulaiman. Yet his life and writing charge it with valence. He, too, is plagued by "friends," fate, a debilitating disease of the skin. He, too, turns sarcastic in his pursuit of understanding and wisdom. He, like Job, is inclined to flip Scripture on its head for ironic effect as his speech mounts to a cosmic perspective. Both that most sophisticated of biblical books and his poems are coiled by swift transformations of mood. Light for both is central, standing for all that's alive and of worth: "Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery, and life unto him that is bitter in soul" (Job 3:20). Ibn Gabirol:

It was night and the sky was clear,  
and the moon was pure at its center  
as it led me along discernment's sphere,  
teaching me by its light and direction—  
though as my heart went out to that light,  
I feared extended misfortune.

And we have already seen what Solomon the Small does with Solomon of Scripture—possessor of creation's secrets and an ongoing echo in the poems.

JERK

That said: The stench of his boasting and sense of self-worth, his truculence and misanthropy, his inability to sustain friendships or stay in one place for any length of time, even his essential sense of the world and time and fate as hostile—all the evidence points to his having been, as Berryman said of Rilke, a jerk.

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

*KINGDOM'S CROWN*

But a jerk who rang the cosmic gong.

*Keter Malkhut*, his most well-known poem, has been translated into English at least seven times over the past two hundred years, first in 1794 by David Levi, a London hatter with rabbinical training. Versions of the poem exist in German, French, Italian, Dutch, Yiddish, Latin, Persian, and Arabic (the latter was found in David Tzemah's manuscript), and the poem appears in prayer books of Jewish communities throughout the world, where it is read on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

It has come a long way. While the poem is framed by its magnificent hymn to the Creator and the magisterial concluding confession, the bulk of the work consists of a cosmography based on the Ptolemaic universe, a mapping of "what there is"—lower limit world, upper limit Lord. The ascent from earth's four elements to the Throne of Glory takes one up through the spheres and the planets, and contains a good many astronomical, and some astrological, considerations, which, in combination with the poet's philosophical tendencies, ruffled the feathers of the local, and formidable, religious establishment of the time. This, it seems, was an ongoing problem for Ibn Gabirol, whom scholars suggest may have been forced to leave Saragossa because of his particular mix of philosophy, mysticism, religion, and science. Isolated and ostracized by his fellow Jewish intellectuals, he had found himself surrounded there by people who

. . . quarrel with all my teachings and talk,  
as though I were speaking Greek.  
"Speak," they carp, "as the people speak,  
and we'll know what you have to say"—  
and now I'll break them like dirt or like straw,  
my tongue's pitchfork thrust into their hay.

As he grew older, his hybrid philosophical inquiry only intensified.

We have nothing in the way of first-hand evidence of response to the poem, but we find a contemporary such as Ibn Janaah calling in his *Sefer HaRiqmah* for the avoidance of "books . . . that deal with the origin and foundation of things . . . the nature of the creation of the upper and lower world, for this is something whose truth cannot be determined, and whose end is attained often at the expense of the Law and faith, and with endless weariness to the soul. It brings no pleasure." And Ibn Ezra writes

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

in his book of poetics that, generally speaking, the intrusion of scientific and astronomical matters into the liturgy was more of a burden than pure Hebrew could bear, and what began as petition and prayer often evolved into heated discussion and argument. He cautioned moderation.

An approach much closer in spirit to Ibn Gabirol's is found in the Muslim *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*:

When the educated man of understanding considers the study of astronomy, and thinks of the tremendous dimensions of the spheres and the swiftness of their movement, his soul longs to ascend to those spheres and to see them with his very own eyes. This, however, it cannot do, on account of the weight of the body. But when the soul separates itself from the body, and is not held back by its wicked doings, its harmful attributes, and its great ignorance, it arrives there in an instant, with the blink of an eye.

The prosody of the poem is worth pausing over, as it has important implications for understanding and translation. Written in the medium of *saj'a*, which is most often if inadequately translated as "rhymed, rhythmic prose," *Kingdom's Crown* is a symphonic work whose primary poetic virtues are musical. It might be regarded as a reprise of the poet's entire diwan, and Ibn Gabirol makes it clear that he considered it the summit of his work. Although there are important Hebrew precursors (to begin with, Sa'adiah Gaon's two poems of petition, where both the rhyme and theme resemble those of Ibn Gabirol's poem), insight with regard to poetic practice once again comes from Arabic literature, where the *saj'a* was used in the Quran. The Arabic term for the form derives from the verb meaning "to coo," or, as the lexicographer E. W. Lane illustrates it: "A pigeon continuing its cry uninterruptedly in one uniform way or manner . . . cooing and prolonging its voice"—a definition that recalls lines by the poet Mina Loy, from "Property of Pigeons": "Pigeons make an irritant, alluring / music; / quelled solfeggios / of shrill wings winnowing / their rejoicing, cooing / fanaticism for wooing . . ."; or García Lorca's free translation of the medieval Arabic of Sirj al-Warak: "The turtledove that with her complaints keeps me from sleep, has a breast that burns like mine, alive with fire" (trans. Christopher Maurer). The circle comes almost round with the thirteenth-century traveler Ibn Khatib's describing the daybreak call of Granada's muezzins, and observing that they "vied with one another with melodies like [those of] turtle doves." While in

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

early eleventh-century Hebrew the form was most often reserved for epistolary writing, the effect of the *saj'a* in *Kingdom's Crown* is in practice much closer to that of certain kinds of incantatory free verse—*Leaves of Grass*, say, or Robert Duncan's *Opening of the Field*. The poem should be taken in, or offered up, quite literally as a music of the spheres.

LOST AND FOUND IN TRANSLATION

The finest Hebrew poetry of the period is the product of an age of translation. But translation, particularly in an age of translation, is not only what hired or inspired workers have rendered into another language; it is also what writers who read in multiple languages translate in thought alone—the force of which is brought to bear on the written language they use. This, granted, is simply influence; in this instance, however, it is influence born of a steady passage across linguistic and regional borders.

Often this passage followed the trade routes. Just as in the nineteenth century the new (albeit lesser) literature and cultural attitudes of the European *Haskalah*, or Enlightenment, were disseminated along with agricultural and other goods and ideas at the Leipzig trade fair each year, when Jewish businessmen from Polish Galicia and Germany would meet, so too in the Judeo-Arabic middle ages immigrants, information, and artistic practices followed the money (read: ships, silks, spices, and scents). Some scholars suggest that the influence of Arabic Andalusian verse made its way along these routes into France, where it was taken in by the troubadours. In the twentieth century this is how one of the most gifted of the freelance pioneers in the study of medieval Hebrew poetry, Sha'ul Abdullah Yosef, found himself in Hong Kong, having relocated for business purposes from Baghdad to Bombay before settling at the far-eastern end of these routes, where he worked daily after hours on a commentary to the poems of Yehudah Halevi.

All of this “translation” from East to West and back again—this removal of people, goods, armies, and art forms—from one context (or soil) to another took place during an Arab literary and scientific renaissance that over time became the critical link in the transmission of Greek thinking to the West. Historian Richard Walzer points out the difference between the Arabs in Europe, who maintained their language and religion as they adopted the learning native to the conquered territory, and the

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

Germanic tribes that invaded Italy, who gave up both their language and religion for that of the local culture but remained closed to the intellectual heritage that the latter had to offer. (And Dante, we remember, placed Muhammad in the ninth pouch of the eighth circle of Hell, which is reserved for the “sowers of scandal and schism.”) Al-Andalus was, then, an extension of a culture that thrived on the news from abroad. Between the eighth and ninth centuries CE, the major Eastern schools of translation gathered manuscripts from across the Arab and Byzantine world, and in either literal, literary, or summary form virtually the entire Greek curriculum of study was translated into Arabic, often through Syriac intermediary texts, with much of the work being done by Christian translators. Thus Muslim and Jewish thinkers in Baghdad and Spain had at their disposal, in addition to a large body of original Arabic and Hebrew compositions, versions of over a hundred works by Galen, most of Aristotle, key books of Plato, Neoplatonic pseudo-Aristotelian texts, pseudo-Empe docles, Indian stories, Persian musical treatises, scientific collections of a diverse nature, mathematical studies of conics, spherics, and pneumatics, medical textbooks, and more.

The “dictionally pure,” Scripture-based Jewish poets of Córdoba, Granada, and Saragossa opened their lives to the entire expanse of that learning, and, in the process, carried out an act of profound if paradoxical cultural redemption: in translating both the essence of their Greco-Arabic learning and the effects of Arabic poetry into an innovative Hebrew verse, in risking loss of linguistic and religious self to immersion in the foreign, the Hebrew poets of Spain found, or founded, the most powerful language of Jewish expression post-biblical literature has known.

METAPHYSICS, OR THE MECHANICALS

*It's through thinking Gabirol sparkles,  
and it's thinkers that he pleases . . .*

—Heine

Discussions of the problem (but never the pleasure) of translation of medieval Hebrew poetry into English almost always turn for guidance to either the English Metaphysical poets or the neoclassical school of Pope, and with good reason. There are obvious parallels to both. Like the Hebrew Andalusian poets, the poets labeled metaphysical by Dryden and

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

Samuel Johnson (for convenience's sake and then as a pejorative), and poets of the English Renaissance in general (and it is *always* in general that the comparison is made), produced a body of work that is often ornamental, conventional, and centered on a situation of court, church, or garden. Their poems, too, are characterized by a fascination with artifice and creation, with transcendentalism and the obscurity that can entail. They, as well, share a worldview marked by imports and correspondence, by heightened awareness of detail, pattern, and form.

There are numerous passages of uncanny similarity: Henry Vaughan's "I saw eternity the other night, / Like a great *Ring* of pure and endless light, / All clear, as it was bright, / And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years, / Driven by the spheres / Like a vast shadow moved . . ." seems a none-too-distant if more mild-mannered descendant of the moonstruck Ibn Gabirol quoted above: "It was night and the sky was clear . . ." Donne's verse sometimes bears a striking resemblance to Ibn Gabirol: "And don't be astonished by a man whose flesh / has longed for wisdom and prevailed; / He's soul encircling physique, / and a sphere in which all is held" summons "Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward," by the MP turned deacon and priest: "Let man's soul be a sphere, and then, in this, / The intelligence that moves, devotion is." The much celebrated metaphysical conceit recalls the figures of the Hebrew and Arabic poets of our period; and of course the poems of Herbert's *Temple* have their partners in the realm of *piyyut* and contemplative nonliturgical verse alike.

And yet . . . compelling and even classroom-correct as these parallels are, and worth pursuing in much greater depth and along historical lines, they seem always, at root, somehow misleading. For behind the analogy, from which the most problematic versions of this poetry usually emerge, there is an implicit assumption that Christian England is in some fundamental respect equivalent to Judeo-Muslim Spain and, by extension, that our hearing "reconstructed" sixteenth- or seventeenth-century verse in Chicago today is parallel to eleventh-century Arabic-speaking Jews hearing masterful eleventh-century Hebrew verse in Berber Granada. They aren't, it isn't, and what we get in translation from the comparison too often sounds less like the major poetry of an age than like Snug, Snout, Starveling, and friends—Shakespeare's *Mechanicals* performing their *Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisby* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "O grim-looking night, O night with hue so

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

black! O night, which ever art when day is not! / O night, O night; alack, alack, alack.”

A welcome voice-over again intrudes from the visual plane, this time from the French scholar Louis Massignon, who is comparing the idea of the Arab and European garden, both of which emerge within a neo-classical cultural frame:

In our classical garden, which began with the Roman Empire and continued with the Medicis and Louis XIV, the intent is to control the world from a central point of view, with long perspective lines leading to the horizon and great water basins reflecting the distances, all framed by relentlessly pruned trees, leading the eye, little by little, to a sense of conquest of the whole surrounding land.

By contrast, the Muslim garden's first and foremost idea is to be enclosed and isolated from the outside world; instead of having its focus of attention on the periphery, it is placed in the center. The garden is created by taking a piece of land, “vivifying” a square section of the desert, into which water is brought. Inside a very high enclosing wall, one finds a staggered arrangement of trees and flowers growing close to one another as one moves from the periphery to the center, and in the center, next to a spraying fountain, is a kiosk. This garden, contrary to the Western garden . . . enables thought to unfold in an atmosphere of relaxation.

The parallel to the verbal arts is not exact, but its basic thrust seems more instructive than the comparison across centuries within the medium. (To move onto somewhat more stable ground, consider Alexander Pope's “grottofied” landscape at Twickenham, which was “expressive of his deepest values as a man and a poet . . . an actual metaphor and emblem of the poet's trade,” in the words of his best biographer.) Massignon continues, describing another important locus of the culture, the mosque, noting that the *types* of materials, ornaments, and subjects employed in its construction “are a reminder . . . that faces and forms do not exist in themselves but are unceasingly recreated by God. We find thus intertwining polygons, circling arcs of varying radii, the so-called arabesque, which is essentially a kind of indefinite negation of closed geometrical forms.” Extending this analysis to all aspects of “the decorative side of Muslim life,” including carpets, mosaics, greetings, and clothes, even the way that foods are seasoned and served, Massignon observes that in each the mind is taken through structurally similar cycles of concentration and release.

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

In short, we are, in the referential field of the medieval Judeo-Muslim aesthetic, compositional light years away from the feel of the eighteenth-century English couplet. And while the poems of Ibn Gabirol *are* metaphysical, and share numerous formal and thematic concerns with the verse of the English renaissance, the specific tones of his metaphysics, and the vector of his thought, point—in as much as translation is concerned—away from, not toward, the diction of Herbert and Donne.

NATURE'S NEOPLATONISM: A METAPOETICS

“The microcosm is the model of the macrocosm,” he says in the third book of *The Fountain of Life* (III:2), taking up the Greek and common medieval notion, “As above, so below.” “If you would picture the composition of the All . . . look at the form of the human body” (III:58). In a complicated adjustment of pure Neoplatonic doctrine (derived through summary intermediate texts brought to Spain in Arabic translation—*The Theology of Aristotle*, for example), the human form is linked by the Divine Will to the larger world beyond us, though these links do not add up to a pantheism. In fact more than one writer has characterized the purpose of Ibn Gabirol's philosophical project, evident in his poetry as well, as an attempt to rescue his Jewish Neoplatonic monotheism from pantheism. Nevertheless, some of the poet's contemporaries and successors remained unconvinced, and the historical record shows (and his poems imply) that he was sometimes accused of a heretical tendency toward pantheistic thinking, or at least of drawing dangerously near it.

The key terms in Ibn Gabirol's philosophical scheme, especially, for a reading of the poetry, are “form” and “matter.” The First Essence (God) creates Universal Matter and Form through the enactment or emanation of his Will. The conjunction of this Universal Form and Matter gives rise to the simple substances, including intellect, soul, and nature, and the chain of emanation extends down into the corporeal world and all its parts. This emanation of divine energy Ibn Gabirol likens to light from the sun—but not to the sun itself; or to intelligence acting in the limbs of the body—but not the soul itself taking action; or, as we have seen, to a fountain whose flow transcends all temporal and spatial dimension. In this way the process of creation is continuous and ongoing at all levels at all times in a universal chain of transformation reaching from that pure source to the lowest point of the cosmos and back up to its unknowable origin. “Help the celestial bodies grow with your souls,” Ibn Gabirol

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

quotes the Arabic *Epistles*, in his ethical treatise, “even as tilling and irrigating help the seed to grow.”

Throughout this talk, the terms of the discussion are identical to those used in describing the period’s poetry: matter takes on form as a body takes on clothing—a vocabulary that has given rise in discussion of the literature to the absolute separation of poetic form and content. But as Ibn Gabirol again and again makes clear in *The Fountain of Life*, “it is impossible for matter to have any reality without form, for it does not take on existence unless it is dressed in form. The existence of a thing comes into being only within its form” (V:8).

Which is the point that Jaroslav Stetkevych makes in his *Zephyrs of Najd* when he says that “instead of looking for signs of dichotomy of form and content, one could, with equal ease, reverse the lens and see in Arabic poetry the closest possible—or the will to the closest possible—marriage between form and content, precisely because that poetry is so highly ‘formalistic’. . . . [P]oetic content not only survives [there] but flourishes, albeit in unaccustomed ways, and extracts out of its predicament a strange power and solidity of imaginative impact.”

As above, so with Ibn Gabirol:

But I’ll tell you something I’ve heard  
and let you dwell on its strangeness:  
sages have said that the secret  
of being owes all  
to the all who has all in his hand:  
He longs to give form to the formless,  
as a lover longs for his friend. . . .

ORIENTALISM

Regardless of how one enters this poetry, no matter what angle of approach one adopts, at some point the route to understanding runs through a Near Eastern world that, for many of us, is at best a mystery, at worst a demonized entity. We’re familiar with some of its mystical literature, often in translations with a New Age veneer, and we have *A Thousand and One Nights*, Disney’s *Aladdin*, Lean’s *Lawrence of Arabia*, and, from the Persian, Edward FitzGerald’s best-selling Victorian fantasia, *The Ruba‘iyat*; but, as anyone who tries to absorb it in translation knows, the

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

gist (let alone the bulk) of Arabic and Persian poetry lies on a still very dark side of the literary moon. The same situation holds for the Hebrew.

The third great obstacle, then, to successful transmission: our relation as Western readers to the largely unknown world of Sephardic and Arab culture. For the vast majority of speakers of English, and even for those with a Jewish education, the literary culture of medieval Spain is by and large a rumor, perhaps a likeness paused before on a crowded vacation itinerary. (For native Israelis it is the memory of an exasperating, murky unit of high-school literature class, required for matriculation.) Debates rage in the Hebrew papers about the relative “universal” worth of other expressions of Sephardic cultures, and attitudes evident in that public controversy inevitably derive from, or trickle down to, scholarly and artistic treatments of even this most Western of Eastern poetries.

So, for example, critics raised on the post-Romantic notion of the self have often sought to explain the mentality behind the “atomized” nature of Arabic, Persian and, by extension, Hebrew medieval poetry—each of which, in various ways, has been called artificial, cloying, fantastic, and decorative or mannered. In part the blame is laid at the feet of the elitist courtly environment and its restrictive system of patronage. But as Julie Meisami points out in *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, a more lethal source of trouble derives from Orientalist projections and misreadings of the work, which charge that the poetry of the East “is unaware of the correct relationship between the poetical ego and the world, mankind and itself.” According to this line of thinking the literature of the East lacks a constituent element of what we recognize as great poetry, and it is therefore best treated as part of a taxonomical study of the mentality it represents. The gist of the problem, Meisami says, is that in an effort to find the symbolic (metaphorical) import of things, readers have often failed to perceive the actual (analogical) dynamic at work in the verse itself. If the former is based on likeness of qualities and uses this likeness to bridge the gap between man and the universe, the latter presupposes what she calls “an elaborate network of correspondences” between nature and humanity, a continuity. Once these cosmological differences are understood, the esthetic preferences of “Eastern” poetry (relating to hyperbole, embellishment, and type, for starters, but extending to sensibility and notions of unity in the poem) can be read in a far more sympathetic light. Lacking that background of understanding, the road to the work is a critical minefield. Even as partisan a reader as Haim Nahman Bialik, the great Hebrew

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

modernist poet who devoted many of his best years to the project he called the “ingathering of our Spanish poetry,” confessed that early in his career he was put off by the “broken glass” and alien poetics of the adopted Arabic poetry, the latter of which he saw as shackles around the feet of the medieval Hebrew poets, artificial fetters that kept them from a natural approach to the world and their language.

Biases of this sort infect translation as well, and readers have come to equate a lush *Ruba‘iyat*-like diction and haze as authentically “Eastern”—this despite the fact the Omar Khayyam’s eleventh-century *Ruba‘iyat* were direct, hard, sometimes harsh, and above all unsentimental. This is not to say that some of Ibn Gabirol’s (or HaNagid’s) poems aren’t sensuous in a way that meets Orientalist expectations, only that to read the poetry well, to derive from it the clear, full sort of pleasure it was intended to give, one might do better to come at it without the residue of Victorian dreams of the East. Instead, one might start with the testimony of the age itself, with, say, the assumption given voice in Ibn Ezra’s *Book of Discussion* and al-Harizi’s *Takhkemoni*, and in countless poems from the period, that we are dealing with a major literature that spoke with tremendous force and range to the educated people of its day. For without a deep and somehow physical sympathy with the poem as a link between the reader and the real, or *a* real, without our keeping our eye on the prize these poems describe, this poetry *as poetry* will elude us.

Mystique and mistrust, then—the whirlpool and six-headed dragon of these waters.

Pus

“Sometimes pus, sometimes a poem,” Yehuda Amichai writes, in a poem called “Ibn Gabirol.”

QABBALAH: FACTS, QUACKS, AND QUIBBLES

Qabbalists from the thirteenth century on have looked to him as a stellar figure in their lineage, much in the way that André Breton and the surrealists reached back into the past to claim Poe and Sade as surrealists before their time. Breton, of course, was establishing a constellation of affinity; the case of the Qabbalists is trickier, as the argument has from time to time been put forth that Ibn Gabirol was either a secret early Qabbalist (who fashioned a lady golem and engaged in various forms of

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

magical activity), a Jewish Sufi, or—and here a kind of wonder-dust is released into the air, as if by the syllables themselves—“a mystic.”

Bracketing the problem of locating Ibn Gabirol with any precision in the history of Qabbalah—an issue that is still unresolved, though it has been dealt with in exemplary fashion by scholars such as Gershom Scholem, Shlomo Pines, Moshe Idel, and Yehuda Liebes—one is struck by the recurrence in the poet’s liturgical work of elements drawn from esoteric Jewish doctrine, including *Merkavah* (Chariot) literature, *Sefer Yetzirah* (The Book of Creation), and the apocalyptic *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer*, all of which in turn have roots in the hard-to-unravel, heretical, but not un-Hebraic tradition of Greek Gnosticism. One finds related elements in so-called secular poems such as “I Love You,” and even—though this is more controversial—in what on the face of it appear to be straightforward court panegyrics such as “The Palace Garden.” In short, whether one defines the term Qabbalah in a strict historical fashion, as the scholars must, or reads ahistorically, as the Qabbalists proper (and poets) often do, it is clear that Ibn Gabirol and the later Qabbalists draw in places on common sources. For a reading of the poetry one need only observe that we are dealing here with a poetic consciousness as visionary as that of Yeats.

READING RELIGIOUS POETRY, OR REACTION

Religion is at its etymological root a “binding back.” It arouses antipathy wherever it goes, and it goes almost everywhere. The religious instinct is, Henry Adams reminds us, the second most powerful of *emotions*.

It doesn’t necessarily make for great poetry, however, any more than the first on Adams’s list—the sexual—guarantees great cinema. The roster of demurrers is distinguished, from Samuel Johnson’s warning that “metrical devotion . . . supplies nothing to the mind” to Auden’s cautioning discretion with regard to the baring of soul in verse.

Throughout the contemplative, satirical, erotic, devotional, elegiac, and encomiastic poems of Ibn Gabirol, religious elements exert a constant pressure. There is of course the raw material of the verse itself—scriptural Hebrew. But there is also the nature of the surrounding society and its most ordinary of assumptions. On the one hand we have our own modern literary expectations of invention and concretion, and on the other we’re presented with a medieval Semitic culture whose every occurrence, even whose science, is understood in a wholly religious frame-

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

work: the “empty” abstraction offends the aesthete, and a patriarchal monotheism and a chauvinistic Judaism put off not only the politically correct. Culture clash is inevitable. Belief and disbelief alike, therefore, must be suspended.

For the motion of the mind in this work is not merely a binding back as in a restriction, but a profound reorientation of attention, a stretching of thought and sensibility, however quietly, to perception’s extremity, to the moment’s relation to first things and last, to an existential bottom-line. With their subtle blending of the personal and communal “I,” the poems bear witness to an extension of range, not an abdication of interest or involvement. And there is in Ibn Gabirol’s work, above all in its ornamental poetics and liturgical forms, an Eastern (some would say Indian or even Chinese) sense of connectedness—from the body’s humors up through nature, the spheres, to the Throne of Glory or the seat of the soul. His is a religion of knowing, a gnosticism. It involves a vital mythic configuration, alive with sound, movement, and spirit at every turn.

SPAINS

When tourists, students, scholars, rabbis, writers, and even politicians talk about medieval Spain, chances are good that they are talking about different things:

There is the Golden Age of Jewish poetry, the period of unrivaled Hebraic literary achievement, with the occasional story of political success: the Spain of Jewish pride, which emerged with miraculous suddenness in the late tenth century, one of the abiding mysteries of Jewish history;

—there is the Spain of the Jewish “neo-lachrymose historians,” in which all paths lead to expulsion or worse;

—there is the elegiac Palestinian equivalent, in which Andalusia equals the abandoned campsite of the beloved in the pre-Islamic *qasida*, equals Palestine and the lost paradise of Islamic power, splendor, and culture;

—and there is the Andalusian rainbow coalition, the Spain of *convivencia* and “inter-faith utopia,” where Arabs, Berbers, Iberians, Slavs, and Jews lived—or seemed to live—in relative comfort side by side;

—there is the enchanted Spain of romantic engravings and Washington Irving’s *Tales of the Alhambra*;

—there is a melodramatic Spain of the Arab-menace and sensual delight, the bodice-ripper Spain of concoctions like Colin de Silva’s airport-

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

paperback *Alhambra*, which picks up where Yehosef HaNagid's head falls off, and presents us with the young Prince Ahmed, whom we overhear reciting pantheistic doggerel to a blossoming magnolia until . . . "From the holy ecstasy of his adoration of beauty, the sight, the sound, the scent enshrined in pure air, from the sweet joy of beauty's clean spirit symbolized by the tree, holy lust emerged. He rose . . .";

—and there is the Spain-of-the-past as imagined literary future, the Andalusia of poets such as Mahmoud Darwish, the eminent Palestinian writer who, in a 1996 interview with a Hebrew literary journal, spoke of an "Andalus that might be here or there, or anywhere . . . a meeting place of strangers in the project of building human culture. . . . It is not only that there was a Jewish–Muslim co-existence," he says, "but that the fates of the two peoples were similar. . . . Al-Andalus for me is the realization of the dream of the poem."

TIQQUN MIDDOT HANEFESH: THE POET IN TRAINING

Far-fetched and fanciful in much of its argument, Ibn Gabirol's ethical treatise *Tiqqun Middot HaNefesh* (The Improvement of the Moral Qualities) is nonetheless of real interest to readers of the poetry. Written in Arabic when the poet was twenty-four, and modeled on Arab ethical handbooks such as Abu Bakhr al-Raazi's ninth-century *Book of the Treatment of the Soul*, it graphs an undissociated sensibility in which the physical and psychological endowments, or impulses, of a person are correlated to ethical conduct. Qualities of the soul, in this not always decipherable scheme, are manifest in the senses, which consist of four humors: blood, yellow gall, black gall, and white gall, which in turn correspond to the four elements, air, fire, earth, and water. The senses (impulses) can be mixed and matched so that the soul's tendencies might be trained for wisdom. Knowledge of the soul is a prerequisite for its development (its ascent) and the soul can be known solely in a descent into physical detail:

If a man be wise, he will employ [the senses] in the right place and restrain them from everything in connection with which he ought not to use them. Let him rather be like a skilful physician, who prepares prescriptions, taking of every medicine a definite quantity . . .

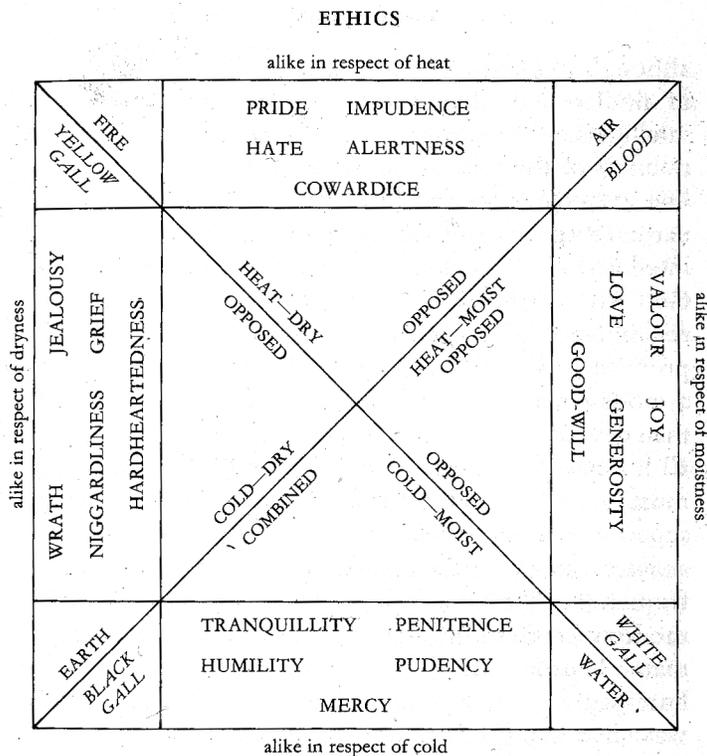
Ibn Gabirol's somewhat eccentric approach yields the Rimbaud-like association of the senses and the qualities of the soul, as follows:

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

<i>SIGHT</i>	<i>HEARING</i>	<i>SMELL</i>
Pride	Love	Wrath
Meekness	Hate	Goodwill
Pudency	Mercy	Jealousy
Impudence	Hard-heartedness	Wide-awakeness
	(Cruelty)	

<i>TASTE</i>	<i>TOUCH</i>
Joy (Cheerfulness)	Liberality
Grief (Apprehensiveness)	Stinginess
Tranquillity	Valor
Penitence (Remorse)	Cowardice

This he derives from a typically medieval mandala-like map of possibilities, where conflicting elements and traits are held in complex balance:



#### AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

Chapter by chapter, impulse by impulse, *Tiqqun Middot HaNefesh* treats all of the above, quoting Arabic poems and a variety of philosophers, including Socrates, “the God-like Plato,” Aristotle, Galen, Origen, The Book of Kuti, Sa’adiah, Alexander the Great, and Ardeshir, the founder of the new Persian dynasty in 222. All chapters begin with the characterization of the quality under discussion, which is then located in a scriptural anatomy. For instance, Grief (Apprehensiveness), which is aligned on our chart with taste:

This quality usually succeeds in establishing itself in the soul when wishes fail of realization, and then the soul is brought to such a point as almost to be killed when it loses the objects of its love. . . . Thus it was said, “Apprehensiveness is living death.” . . . The constitution of apprehensiveness is cold and dry, like the black gall (humor). No man can absolutely escape it. In some it attains immense proportions, so that they thereby become afflicted with psychical ailments. Thus it is said (Proverbs xii:25), “Gloom in the heart of man maketh it stoop, but a good word maketh it glad.”

Ethical implications and exhortations follow. Early in the book the author apologizes for the gaps in his argument, which he attributes to difficult times and the fact that “human power is but slight, especially in the case of a man like me, who is always greatly troubled and who does but scantily realize his hopes.”

#### UNDERTOW

The risks of involvement, the threat presented by the force and hidden currents of the work, to writer, reader, translator:

Tracing the arc of Andalusian Arabic poetry, from its tenth- and eleventh-century heyday to the fourteenth-century calligraphed verse of Granada’s court poet turned chief vizier, Ibn Zamrak, which one can still see on a visit to the Alhambra, the Spanish scholar Emilio García Gómez lamented the expressive thinness of the later work and suggested that it was the price paid for its decorative brilliance, an inevitable outgrowth of the aesthetic of the Andalusian poetic art: “It had to die really like that,” he says, “on the walls.”

By the same token the biblical quotation in the Hebrew verse can overpower by sheer strength or deception, and one must be alert to the particular spin of the implant, which—its loaded provenance notwithstanding—was used neutrally much of the time, though also for conscious

#### AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

allusive effect, and sometimes in an ironic manner. Shelomoh Delme-digo, a seventeenth-century Italian-Hebrew author, regrets the misguided use of the biblical allusion by the Hebrew poets of his day, saying that it has devolved from an ornament of power and purity to the treacherous stuff of a baroque, mannered game—allusion for allusion's sake alone.

And stock phrases lurk—the line between revivification and strain is shifting, and often in the ear of the listener alone, who himself becomes a kind of transmitter. So that problems of reception abound, and spill into the English equation: convention that was once effective turns stale; the link between poet and public weakens; communal and private seem hopelessly split. Translators are tempted to sidestep these obstacles, reducing the verse to prose or a limited imagism, or, in an effort perhaps to overcome these difficulties en masse, inflating their lines with an artificial diction, to account for the non-vernacular nature of the Hebrew (the language of education, encountered from age three on). Slackness here, inadvertent stiffness or comedy there . . . as the poem is swept out to sea.

#### VOICE

Homogenization: they all look alike to me.

Ibn Gabirol lived during HaNagid's lifetime, yet the poetic distance between the two, despite all they share, is the distance between Whitman and Dickinson. Ibn Gabirol's experience of the language overlapped with his mentor's; his experience of the body was worlds away.

Some eighty-five years separated HaNagid's death from Yehudah Halevi's: Spenser, say, to Dryden. Or Emerson to Robert Lowell.

#### WHY, WHY NOW

Given the various obstacles to successful translation of the work, the tradition of failure, the cultural disparity, the (real) psychological risks, the stretches of time, the tiny audience—the translator would have to be something of a fool not to ask, at one point or another: Why bother?

Because “the poem must move from reader to reader, reading to reading, to stay alive,” as Eliot Weinberger has written. “The poem dies when it has no place to go. Poetry is that which is worth translating,” he concludes, correcting Frost's isolationist aphorism. And little in the Hebrew of the last two millennia can approach Ibn Gabirol line by line, for “worth.”

AN ANDALUSIAN ALPHABET

And because there is in the poetry of Ibn Gabirol and his peers a rich and pertinent (even postmodern) suspension of time and text; a compelling tension binding the past and present, the personal and that which transcends it; a stunning fusion of nature and the reality of what artifice posits; and an improbable union of the Hebraic and Islamic at root . . . just when it seemed that poetry had lost much of its power to matter—to instruct, delight, nourish, and transport.

X-RAY

An X-ray of the work on the student's table, then, would show its biblical skeleton and its rabbinic ligatures, the influence of Arabic and its cultural graft. An X-ray of these elements of the poem *in motion* would yield only a blur; it would reflect but not reveal the secret sources of the verse, its turning in will and desire, which we can only intuit.

YHWH

As though the nature of the unpronounceable Name ran through the poem like an underground stream, now a promise, now a ripeness, giving the language constellation, and surfacing when topography allowed.

Sometimes echoed, but never directly heard.

ZYGOTE

Above all, as reader of the Hebrew or English, as translator, scholar, one is trying to keep it fresh—to make it new, a phrase Pound lifted from an Emperor's washbasin, circa 1760 BCE, where (during a drought) it referred not to a Robert Hughesian shock, but to the wheat crop, the annual source of his people's food: to prayer for rain, fertilization, and sustenance.

Wherever one looks in Ibn Gabirol's work and his culture of verse, hybrid creations are taking shape. Forms are giving birth to an infinite variety of similar forms, boundless and self-contained, at once sensuous and stark, not necessarily symbolic, suggestive of something beyond themselves, and meaningful in relation alone. This is a poetry of flight, from one version of the real to another. But it is also a war for expression, waged by a man who was "tried seven times in the furnace of fate" and lived only for the truth of his poem.