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***Love and Mercy at the Edge of Madness: Ramon Llull's Book of the Lover and the Beloved and Ibn 'Arabî's «O doves of the arâk and the bân trees . . . »***

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LOVE AND MERCY AT THE EDGE OF MADNESS:  
RAMON LLULL'S *BOOK OF THE LOVER*  
*AND THE BELOVED* AND IBN 'ARABÎ'S  
«O DOVES OF THE ARÂK AND THE BÂN TREES...»

MARIA ROSA MENOCAL

The thirteenth century in the Iberian peninsula stands as an extraordinarily eloquent example of how from the whirlwinds of historical madness rare souls will surface to preach seemingly naive messages of love. Between them, Ibn 'Arabî and Ramon Llull lived that period, from the end of the twelfth to the beginning of the fourteenth centuries, that was so pivotal in the turbulent history of a multi-cultural Iberia. For Hispanists or Europeanists it is no doubt surprising to have the thirteenth century set out as a period of grave difficulty: the histories of the victors have made of it a period of considerable glory. In fact, that century presided over by an Alfonso the Wise — far more properly the Learned — whose considerable devotion to schools of both translation and massive historical projects (the two not unrelated, of course) is seen as providing much of the impetus and linguistic wherewithal for the beginnings of a substantial Castilian culture. But, as always, there is the other side of the coin.

When Ibn 'Arabî was born in Murcia in 1165 Andalusia was a substantial and substantially intact kingdom under the Almohads and he spent thirty years living and studying in a Seville that was still in great measure the glorious Seville of the Taifas.<sup>1</sup> A

<sup>1</sup> The politically turbulent but culturally glorious period of the taifas, or city states, defined the better part of the eleventh century in Spain and it ends when, following the Castilian occupation of Toledo in 1085, the Almoravids invaded the peninsula and presided over a turbulent and difficult period whose many and varied intolerances prefigured the events of the subsequent centuries. The disintegration of Almoravid control led to yet a second invasion from the

great traveller, within and without the peninsula, he would have a dramatic, poetically just meeting with Ibn Rushd, Averroes, in a Cordoba just barely still the old Córdoba. In 1198, as the thirteenth proper is at hand, Averroes dies in exile, in Marrakech, although his bones were returned to the city for burial — and a last meeting with Ibn 'Arabî.<sup>2</sup> In Murcia, shortly thereafter, Ibn

other side of the straits that found its justification in the unification of Muslim states and in the restoration of the orthodoxies and the Almohads, with their restoration of the Caliphate, give a semblance of Arabic political form to the twelfth century in the peninsula — one, clearly, not destined to last. The most accessible historical-cultural narration of this period and the literary figures who flourished in both good times and bad is still Monroe, Introduction.

<sup>2</sup> The two encounters between these two most famous of Andalusians who may be seen to represent two poles of Islam (or Christianity or Judaism), the Platonic and the Aristotelian, are narrated by the younger one, Ibn 'Arabî himself, in much quoted passages. The first Cordovan meeting, when the narrator was still a young man, is instigated by the already old and venerated Averroes who has heard tell of the spiritual enlightenment of the prodigious youngster: «When I entered, the master arose from his place, received me with signal marks of friendship and consideration, and finally embraced me. Then he said 'Yes'. and I in turn said: 'Yes'. His joy was great at noting that I had understood. But then taking cognizance of what had called forth his joy, I added: 'No'. Immediately Averroes winced, the color went out of his cheeks, he seemed to doubt his own thought. He asked me this question: 'What manner of solution have you found through divine illumination and inspiration? Is it identical with that which we obtain from speculative reflection?' I replied: 'Yes and no. Between the yes and the no, spirits take their flight from their matter, and heads are separated from their bodies...»

Ibn 'Arabî has a second encounter with Averroes in a vision that is summoned in a moment of spiritual ecstasy. The third and final one which, no less than the others, starkly defines both men, takes place when the great Aristotelian's body is brought back for internment in Cordoba: «I had no further occasion to meet him until his death... in Marakesh. His remains were taken to Cordoba, where his tomb is. When the coffin containing his ashes was loaded on the flank of a beast of burden, his works were placed on the other side to counterbalance it. I was standing there motionless... [and after another observer notes that the books serve as counterweight to the body]: Then I stored up within me [the other's words] as a theme of meditation and recollection ...and



'Arabî has a dream vision that urges him to abandon his home land and sends him off to the East, as it would turn out, forever. But when he dies in Damascus in 1240 his homeland existed no more: Cordoba had already been in Christian hands for a half dozen years and Murcia and Seville, his two Spanish homes, would also be lost as Muslim cities within the decade.<sup>3</sup> By the middle of the century, of course, Alfonso's politically difficult but culturally productive reign begins but here, too, there is a bittersweetness for one might readily see that the Alfonsine transmission, to inject incalculable vigor into the Christian/Latin cultures on the rise, is in a number of ways and end of the line for the Spanish Muslims and their culture.

But in a different part of the peninsula, the second half of the thirteenth century would yield a spirit and scholar astonishingly like the remarkable Ibn 'Arabî: five years before his death a kindred soul had been born in Majorca, a Majorca reconquered only a few years before and still largely populated by both Muslims and Jews. And by the time Ramon Llull died in 1316, also abroad, in what is now Tunis, there was nothing but a politically besieged and morally embattled Granada left to bear witness, for the next two centuries, to the richly polyvalent world of Iberia which had nourished both these men and which in different ways defined the remarkable mixture of encyclopaedism and mysticism that make them the most significant figures of their difficult ti-

then I said: 'On one side the master, on the other his works. Ah! how I wish I knew whether his hopes have been fulfilled». As Corbin notes, the three episodes, in their narration by Ibn 'Arabî, tell volumes about both men, especially the narrator: the young man who bears witness to knowledge acquired without human teaching; the poet who bears witness to the truth of theophanies; and, in rendering homage to the master philosopher, Ibn Rushd, poignancy and a stark acknowledgement of the raw symbolism and provocative image of Averroes and his works balanced on the mule. Ibn 'Arabî's narration is available in a number of sources in translation: Asín Palacios, *El Islâm cristianizado*, 39-40; Corbin 41-43 (cited here); and Nasr, 93-95.

<sup>3</sup> Murcia in 1243 and Seville in 1248.

mes. At one level, Ibn 'Arabî and Ramon Llull appear to share much with the (now) far better known and more studied Alfonso and the three of them seem to comprise an astonishing trilogy of «sabios». But the Murcian and the Majorcan are allied in ways that set them apart crucially from Alfonso: they were itinerant, no doubt eccentric, wise men, powerless politically, shockingly prolific in their writing whereas he was a king and a patron of letters, powerful in both realms. Crucially, and it is to this in great measure that this brief study is devoted, Llull and Ibn 'Arabî, both to be remembered as exemplary mystics, have left us superb poetic testimonies of their vision of a unifying Love. Out of a moment of rapidly encroaching intolerance they carved out a breath of something far more crucial than mere tolerance or liberalism: fusions and unions. It is curious, and I want to suggest not accidental, that each of them, the superbly devout Muslim and Christian, believed that a reconciliation between their religions was possible and, at the same time, wrote poetic works that suggest that sacred and profane love are no less reconcilable with each other. Love, to paraphrase Ibn 'Arabî himself, was their religion and their texts.

The *Libre d'amic et amat*, the *Book of the Lover and the Beloved* (hereafter the *Book*) is properly a part (chapter ninety nine) of Llull's *Libre d'Evast e Blanquerna*, the romance which is probably the most widely read among his vast corpus of works of virtually every type. It was probably written in 1274 and it coincides with the early years of Llull's conversionary fervor, composed at Miramar, where the study of Arabic and of Llull's *Ars* were the principal subjects of instruction for the Franciscans who ended up there — both to achieve the greater understanding of Islam Llull believed was necessary for a reconciliation of the Faiths and, on the surface of it paradoxically, to train as missionaries. No less significantly, this «collection» of three hundred and sixty six brief observations about a Lover and his Beloved, or about Love, is written shortly after the completion of Llull's



major work, the *Llibre de contemplació en Déu*, a work in fact originally written in Arabic and then translated into Catalan.<sup>4</sup> Although this charming but generically somewhat perplexing book is no doubt Lull's most enduringly popular — no doubt because of its apparent simplicity, brevity and accessibility since so much else of his is of a far more abstract and philosophically difficult nature — serious study of Lull's work has been carried out primarily by those whose interests are not literary. Or, to put it more precisely, the critical attention paid to the *Book* has seen it, *grosso modo*, as a «version», in the linguistic clothing of «courtly» or other secular love, of Lull's «real» interests and convictions, which have to do with divine love. Thus the most common approach or interpretation — and this is part of a considerable critical tradition in dealing with «mystical» poetry — is that there is a what amounts to a simple substitution of divine for profane, that the writer has indulged in a sort of secondary metaphor by imposing spiritual meaning, which is clearly of central importance, on the language of courtly love poetry, which is, no lessevidently, of secondary importance.<sup>5</sup> Ibn 'Arabi's love poetry,

<sup>4</sup> There is both considerable irony and interest in the fact that Catalan as a prose literary language, like Castilian, is born in translation from the Arabic. (Lull, in this way too, is Alfonso's counterpart, although the massive encyclopaedic work, as well as the translations, were executed by Lull himself whereas Alfonso, of course, had a personally far more limited role). Nevertheless, and despite all manner of other manifestations, there are the usual denials of or limitations to the degree of Arabic «influence», particularly to the notion that Lull might be a Sûfi in Christian guise. See, for example, the introduction by Lola Badia to the most recent Castilian edition of the *Libro de amigo y amado*, where Sûfi thought is not even classed among the «fuentes claramente detectables» (xxxi) — despite the explicit acknowledgement of Sûfi inspiration by the narrator Blanquerna. For an extensive discussion of the nature of the difficulties in recognizing Arabic sources and the consequent effect on literary analysis (even in a case remarkable as Lull's) see my 1987 study.

<sup>5</sup> Smith provides a concise but fully detailed study of this and although he maintains at both beginning and end that Lull has adapted the language of his 'pasada folor' to the more transcendent enterprise of later years (thus «standing

to which I will turn later, has suffered the identical critical fate and in neither case, of course, is this unique but rather part of a considerable critical tradition.

Indeed, the complex and often puzzling relationships between secular and religious love and their respective lyrics have left a series of unresolved and intriguing problems in the study of both «courtly love» and mystical poetry. By and large both our epistemological and ontological approaches dictate a separation of these as two essentially distinct kinds of love and, presumably by extension, poetry, even in those cases when this is precisely the issue, when they are clearly fused within the text at hand. These cases of overlap exist, it would appear, because the curious phenomenon of «love» is shared by the two types, and because it is assumed inevitable that poetic language itself will bring to bear certain resemblances of expression. Thus, a certain contamination between the two may be found in different periods, specific poets, given poems. But regnant schemes of analysis generally provide that this fusion is one of expression rather than of essence, that, for example, the language of love used for a human lover may be superbly expressive of a certain kind of passionate love for God (this is the mode of analysis that often emerges for dealing with «mystical» poetry); conversely, a language of worship in principle drawn from and suited to the adoration of God, will reappear, perhaps faintly blasphemously, in the context of a human relationship (this, of course, is the model that has served the analysis of much «courtly love» poetry). In the end, in other words, in the concrete terms of a (presumably) real order of things, the lover loves either God or a mortal and the poet as his alter ego may tease both language and the reader with the possibility of

in the great progression from the Old Provençal lyric to the *Divina Commedia*...) he provides other insights that suggest that the relationship between the two poetic modes in Llull's thought and poetry is actually considerably more complicated.



parallels and overlaps, but in the end, too, the poetry is concomitantly analyzable as one or the other as well.

There are a number of readily apparent problems with this general scheme of things. Firstly, it is not clear how and why the two modes of expression would serve each other's needs and remain inadequate to serve their own. In other words, it may be plausible to sustain that the lover can only adequately express his passion in the tropes of adoration that his linguistic and religious traditions have refined for praise of the Maker. Or, conversely, it appears easy to understand and analyze the impulse to appropriate the language of a lover for the expression of «lover-like» relationship with God — noting, of course, the problematic tautologies in the descriptive forms themselves. But a distinct problem emerges once one has admitted not only that both modes of expression do exist but that they may cross paths and stand, in a significant number of cases, as interchangeable: what then is the basis for their ontological distinction of which we seem so instinctively sure? Secondly, and as a result, our criticism has been notoriously at pains and difficulties to deal with a series of texts where the referential distinction between human and divine is not only «not clear» but explicitly confounded. Thus the status of the Beatrice of the *Vita nuova* or that of the elusive «Good Love» of the *Libro de buen amor*, to name just two of the most significant examples of major texts, has evolved and remained the focal point and constant conundrum of Dante and Juan Ruiz criticism, respectively.

Curiously, the critical approaches to these and comparable texts rarely involve a truly serious consideration of the very real fusion suggested by the language and the tropes of texts such as these. It seems to be beyond (or beneath) most post-Cartesian and aggressively «objective» criticism to take as true a proposition that is not considered to be true within our own cosmological and belief systems, particularly those vulgarly held to be reasonable. The result is that when a text — and both of those I



want to focus on here are exemplary of this type — appears to suggest an existential and essential indistinguishability between what in other contexts may be separately identified as God and Lover the most substantial implications of the radical proposition are avoided altogether. Ironically, but not altogether surprisingly, this has meant that much of what is called mystical poetry is read and commented through the prism of the belief system(s) from which such mysticisms explicitly sets itself apart. Thus, purportedly carifying commentary is deemed not only appropriate but inordinately essential for the lyric's purposeful hermeticism or for verses that are meant to provoke a contemplation that eschews conventional «clarification». And conversely, as I have noted above, texts that could be read as created to express the indistinguishability between a God and a Lover are read to conform to an epistemological system which may permit the use of the language of one to describe the Other — but within which the distinguishability of the two is in fact an essential, implicit dualism that provides the linguistic framework of veils and representations, one for the Other or One for the other.<sup>6</sup>

Both Ibn 'Arabî's «O doves of the arâk and the bân trees» and Llull's *Book of the Lover and the Beloved* present explicit challenges to those modes of both thought and representation. The poem of Ibn 'Arabî's is by far and away his most famous often cited:

O doves of the arâk and the bân trees; take pity to not redouble my sorrows  
with [your] mourning.

<sup>6</sup> Capitalization added by modern editors of the work can and does inscribe a primary level of meaning and interpretation and its interesting to note that while Peers' translation into English rather neutrally capitalizes both Beloved and Lover, the most recent and widely used translation into Spanish, Martín de Riquer's, imposes a far more specific reading onto the text by capitalizing, and thus divinizing, Amado but leaving amigo (and variants, such as «el loco») uncapitalized and thus, obviously and unmistakable profane.

Take pity; do not reveal my hidden affections and secret sorrows with your sad cooing.

I respond to her in the evening and in the latter part of the forenoon with the mournful lament of one deeply moved by passion and the moaning of one madly in love.

The spirits faced each other from opposite sides in the ghadâ thicket (like winds blowing from contrary directions) so that they bent their branches over me, thus annihilating me.

And they brought me different kinds of tormenting desire and passion as well as novel forms of affliction.

Hence, who will give the assurance of [attaining] Jam', who of al-Muhassab of Mina, who of Dhât al-Athl, and who of Na'mân?

They walk around my heart moment after moment for the sake of a certain love and affliction [of mine], and they kiss my pillars,

Just as the best of mankind walked around the Ka'ba, which the evidence of reason proclaims to be imperfect,

And kissed some stones in it, though he was a Nâtiq; yet what is the rank of the Holy Sanctuary in comparison with the dignity of one human being?

How often did they not swear and solemnly vow that they would not change, yet one dyed with henna does not keep faith.

Yet one of the most wondrous things is a young veiled gazelle who points with fingertips dyed red like the jujube and winks with [its] eyelids,

While its pasture is [the region] lying between [my] breastbones and my abdomen. Lo, how wondrous is a garden in the midst of fires!

My heart has adopted every shape; it has become a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,

A temple for idols and a Pilgrim's Ka'ba, the tables of a Torah and the pages of a Koran.

I follow the religion of Love; wherever Love's camels turn, there Love is my religion and my faith.

We have an example in Bishr, the lover of Hind and her sister, and in Qais and Laila, also in Maiya and Ghailân.

(Monroe, 318-321)

The uninitiated will surmise, correctly, that this is a poem that has been subjected to considerable exegesis; in fact, as with most of Ibn 'Arabî's work, it is believed to be inaccessible without numerous layers of commentary which decipher all manner of explicit and arcane allusions, most of them either Koranic or in



any case theological and bearing on Ibn 'Arabî's highly influential mystical thought.<sup>7</sup> But this is, at least in part, to miss the implications of several of the cornerstones of his very mysticism. Like Llull, Ibn 'Arabî is astonishing for the scope and quantity of his writings — both of such unusual dimensions that many describe them as part of the indications that the authors were particularly graced by God, part of their saintliness, even. Beyond quantity, however, Ibn 'Arabî, although largely unknown to Hispanists, is perhaps the most influential Spanish Muslim among other Muslims: the most powerful of Sûfî thinkers. Like Llull too, he is far removed from the mainstream and the orthodoxy of his religion. His incomparable place among the mystics of Islam is evoked in his list of other names by which he was and is known among the faithful: Muhyi'd-Dîn, «Animator of the Religion», al-Shaikh al-Akbar, «Doctor Maximus», Ibn Aflatûn, «The Son of Plato» or «The Platonist».<sup>8</sup>

The sentiments evoked by even the most cursory reading of his famous poem are strongly suggestive of the fundamental aspects of his beliefs, commonly described (as the last of his names indicates) as Neoplatonic. But as a Muslim Ibn 'Arabî was also ineradicably tied to the Logos and the Book itself and his mysticism is rooted in two features that not only distinguish it rather decisively from other manifestations of mystic thought but which give us a substantial framework for dealing with his

<sup>7</sup> Monroe, for example, provides the following (relatively simple) gloss for the third verse: «I respond to her, i.e., I repeat to her what she says to me, as God said to the soul when he created it, 'Who am I?' and it answered, 'Who am I?' referring to its qualities, whereupon He caused it to dwell four thousand years in the sea of despair and indigence and abasement until it said to Him, 'Thou art my Lord'».

<sup>8</sup> The most useful sources of further information about Ibn 'Arabî include Asín Palacio's classic, the rather straightforward Nasr and the difficult but brilliant, and now classic, Corbin. Each of these provides some biographical and historical detail as well as considerable exegesis of the mystic's vast work and both Nasr and Corbin provide extensive and still useful bibliographies.

poetry, particularly for dealing with it as something other than an arcanelly encoded scripture. Firstly, as Corbin so elegantly expresses it, Ibn 'Arabî elaborates a theophany that is «the manifestation of the unknowable God in the angelic form of the celestial Anthropos...» (27) But for Ibn 'Arabî, who (not surprisingly) on and off has been considered heretical, a pantheist, within Islamic communities (particularly within Sunni communities where Islam is structured more as a legal rather than a prophetic or mystical enterprise) his recurring, universal theophanies are grounded in the Book, a Book which is, moreover, the cipher of an eternal Word.<sup>9</sup> The virtue of this construct—and it is this that sheds considerable light on how one can begin to approach the poetry—is that it is an eternal Word forever capable of producing new creations. Moreover, and this is the second major feature that differentiates Ibn 'Arabî from other mystics, images and the Imagination are central and critical features: they are to be used to embrace and enhance spirituality. In fact, there is clearly far greater value in images and, evidently, the hermeticism of a poem such as the one quoted, than in exegesis and commentary. It is not difficult to see, I think, that Ibn 'Arabî's mystical hermeneutics, which clearly reject «mainstream» Islamic exoterism, have powerful implications for a critical hermeneutics, per force esoteric, for his poetry. The poetry, in fact, in a universe where the Logos is a critical center, is itself a theophany and its images, if properly absorbed, conduits to spirituality.

For the Lull scholar, and for the reader of the *Book of the Lover and the Beloved*, much of this may resound familiarly. Lull too is an exemplary Neo-Platonist and would become, as

<sup>9</sup> Although Corbin's brilliant study is suitable, in great measure, only for the initiated, a briefer and very clear exposition of Ibn 'Arabî's theophanic vision is found in Nasr, especially 116-118. Nasr makes explicit the essential connection between theophany and pantheism that should also be tied to the vision of Beloved: «...every prophet is an aspect of the Supreme Logos and is himself 'a logos' or a word of God» (117).



Ibn 'Arabî was (less actively but no less influentially) strongly anti-Averroist. Most importantly, Llull's key *Ars magna* is an expression of his belief that all reality — and this would of course include language itself and its constructs — is a theophany. Whether or not this then makes the beatified Llull in reality a «Christian Sûfi» or, for that matter, whether we should not view Ibn 'Arabî as a «Muslim monk» is to fall precisely into the categorical, exoterical, trap both mystics are steering us away from. Although here, as elsewhere, there is a strong ideological reluctance to seeing an «Arabic influence» in the work of Llull, a generation younger than Ibn 'Arabî, the issue of «borrowings» in the conventional sense is particularly fruitless in this case. On the one hand it is undeniable that Llull's grounding in Arabic is as strong as a non-Muslim's could be — as I have noted his encyclopaedic *Llibre de contemplació* was written in Arabic, so he was far from a mere schoolboy in his knowledge of the language and, per force, the philosophical traditions that were borne by the linguistic tradition. Clearly, Llull could pick and choose the aspects of the tradition he wished to incorporate into his own and reject others — and the fact that his life's quite active mission (aside from and as part spreading the wisdom of the *Ars*) was the reconciliation of Christianity and Islam (through conversion) is whatever further «proof» might be needed that Llull can scarcely be understood outside an Arabic and Islamic context, as well as within a Christian and Latin and Catalan one. And that is precisely the point: like Ibn 'Arabî his mysticism and his encyclopaedism are not paradoxically allied in one person but rather multiple manifestations of a theophanistic spirituality and intellect — (and like him, too, he was regularly suspected of heresy and of pantheistic tendencies in particular, and eventually he was denied sanctification because of doubts about his orthodoxy). And the *Book*, like «O doves of the bân and the arâk trees...» is an explicit challenge to the analytic categories that would separate Beloved from beloved and to analytic procedures that subvert (conscious-

ly or no) the text by rendering it exoteric when it is rooted in esoterism. In their explicit (and perhaps outrageous) challenge to one of the most essential ontological distinctions within orthodox Juedo-Christian-Islamic thought these two poets and scholars are no less challenging the validity of the exegesis, at least orthodox, rational exegesis as an approach to their contemplative poetry. It is only rational commentary, after all, that could deny what the text actually said and it is only through rational explanatory commentary that the hermeticism of such literature can be made «intelligible» — destroyed.

The *Book of the Lover and the Beloved* is explicitly devised as a contemplative guide: the prologue details that Blanquerna (hero of the romance who, acting out the textual abandonment of orthodoxy for hermeticism has eschewed the Papacy and become a hermit), following the example of the Sûfis, has composed brief and difficult lines that both arise from and encourage a spiritual contemplation of God. It is evident, furthermore, that in the language of Lover and Beloved there resides precisely that shift from intellect to spirit, from reason to passion, that is inherent and necessary for mystical contemplation. Thus we are given three hundred and sixty six thoughts, one to dwell on each day of the year and most of them share that elusive and often daunting marriage of extreme simplicity and considerable perplexity.<sup>10</sup> And

<sup>10</sup> Anyone familiar with zen and its poetry will by now have recognized the considerable similarities of form and function as well as content: the poetry is brief and hermetic; stark images are meant to provoke contemplation leading to a spiritual enhancement inimical to intellectual understanding, and empirically unresolvable paradoxes are often emphasized, precisely to elude the traps of the reasonable intellect and its overbearing hermeneutics. A typical example:

*I take blindness as vision, deafness as hearing;  
I take danger as safety and prosperity as misfortune.  
Or, in a style more reminiscent of the imagery of Ibn 'Arabi:  
Above the budless branches  
The golden phoenix soars,*



in most cases the difficulty set out for contemplation is that of the paradoxes of a love grounded in suffering and difficulty:

(3)

Ajustaren-se molts amadors a amar un Amat qui els abundava tots d'amors; e cascú havia per cabal son Amat e sos pensaments agradables, per los quals sentien plaents tribulacions.

(Many lovers come together to love One alone, their Beloved, who made them all abound in love. And each one had the Beloved as his precious possession, and his thoughts of him were very pleasant, making him suffer a pain which brought delight).<sup>11</sup>

(7/8)

Demana l'Amat a l'amic: — Has membraça de nulla cosa que t'haja guardonat, per ço cor me vols amar? Repòs: — Hoc, per ço cor entre los treballs e els plaers que em dónes, no en faç diferència.

(The Beloved asked the Lover, «Have you remembered any way in which I have rewarded you for you to love me thus?» «Yes» replied the Lover, «for I make no distinction between the trials which you send and the joys»).

(115/116)

En un ram cantava un aucell, e deïa que ell daria un novell pensament a amador qui le en donàs dos. Donà l'aucell lo novell pensament a l'amic, e l'amic donà'n dos a l'aucell, per ço que alleujàs sos turments; e l'amic sentí muntiplicades ses dolors.

(A bird was singing on a branch, 'I will give a fresh thought to the lover who will give me two'. The bird gave that fresh thought to the Lover, and the Lover gave two to the bird to lighten its afflictions, and the Lover felt his own griefs increased).

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*Around the shadowless tree*

*The jade elephant circumambulates.*

(Miura and Sasaki, 120, 122).

<sup>11</sup> These and subsequent citations are from Martín de Riquer's edition and the English translation by Allison Peers. Note that chapter 5 of the Peers translation is missing in the Riquer edition and that all subsequent chapters differ in numeration accordingly — and the Riquer edition thus ends with 365 rather than 366 chapters. I have given first the Riquer number and second the Peers number. This discrepancy is rectified in the 1985 edition of Riquer's translation which, however, does not include the Catalan text.

(116/117)

Encontraren-se l'amic e l'Amat, e foren testimonis de llur encontrement saluts, abraçaments, e besars, e llàgremes, e plors. E demanà l'Amat a l'amic de son estament; e l'amic fo embarbesclat en presència de son Amat.

(The Lover and the Beloved met together, and their greetings, embraces, kisses, weeping, and tears testified to their meeting. Then the Beloved asked the Lover how he was, and the Lover was speechless before his Beloved).

(136/237)

Demanaren a l'amic qui era son Amat. Respòs que ço qui el faia amar, desirar, llanguir, sospirar, plorar, escanir, morir.

(They asked the Lover, «Who is your Beloved?» He answered, «He who makes me love, desire, faint, sigh, weep, endure reproaches, and die»).

(255/256)

Falses lloadors blasraven un dia l'amic en presència de son Amat. Havia l'amic paciència, e l'Amat justícia, saviea, poder. E l'amic amà més ésser blasmat e reprès, que ésser negú dels falses blasmdors.

(False flatterers were speaking ill of the Lover one day in the presence of his Beloved. The Lover was patient, and the Beloved showed his justice, wisdom, and power. And the Lover preferred to be blamed and reproved than to be like one of those who falsely accused him).

(364/365)

Amor escalfava e aflamava l'amic en membraça de son Amat. E l'Amat lo refredava ab llàgremes e plors, e ab oblidament dels delits d'aquest món, e ab renunciament dels vans honraments. E creixien les amors con l'amic membrava per qui sostenia llangors, tribulacions, ni los hòmens mundans per qui sostenien treballs, persecucions.

(Love heated and inflamed the Lover with remembrance of his Beloved, and the Beloved cooled his ardour, with weeping, tears, and forgetfulness of the delights of this world and the renunciation of vain honours. So his love grew when he remembered for whom he suffered griefs and afflictions, and for whom the men of the world bore trials and persecutions).

This exemplary sampling reveals, firstly, the much noted affinity between Llull's language and that of the poetry of so-called «courtly» love, the latter no less grounded in irrational and ultimately rationally unresolvable paradoxes and contradictions: the



pain that brings delight, the identity of trials and joys, the interchangability of kisses and tears, joy and weeping, the empathetic affinity between lover and bird (or other non-human manifestation of Self and/or God) that has the bird singing the same pains and joys, the Beloved whose behavior is merciful and cruel for, in the end, the difference between these, if there is one, may be inarticulable. And if we now turn back to Ibn 'Arabî's poem we can see most of the same fundamental principles at work: the poem opens with a classic evocation of birds in a state of communion with the poet; love is rapturous and painful at once; and the nature of the beloved is ambiguous and evoked equally with the language of secular love («one dyed with henna...» «a young veiled gazelle...») and that of sacred love (the extended vocation of the circumambulation of the Ka'ba in verses 6 through 9). And the poem culminates in verses that explicitly tie the varieties of love and religious manifestations to each other and, in a final verse routinely assumed to be a statement about a different kind of love, to the famous secular loves of courtly poetry. The final verses, famous for their eloquent evocation of pantheism, 13 through 15, are almost invariably cited truncated: the final verse, 16, is in fact properly and explicitly connected («We have an example...») but it is never cited along with the previous three.<sup>12</sup> Monroe's annotation makes explicit the reading that justifies the truncation: «We have an example in them», because God only afflicted them with love for human beings like themselves in order that he might show, by means of them, the falseness of those who pretend to love Him and yet feel no such transport

<sup>12</sup> See Nasr 118 and Corbin 135, but they are certainly not alone in this citational practice — I have done so myself because the final verse is, in fact, jarring and is, in fact, apparently contradictory and thus unsuitable in certain rhetorical circumstances (the same is clearly true for Nasr and Corbin in the passages where they cite the verses) since the relatively easy pantheism expressed in 13-15 becomes considerably more difficult and complex when the final verse is attached.

and rapture in loving Him...» (321) I would argue quite the contrary: as in Llull's contemplative verses the poet is suggesting that the varieties of experience of Love are not different from each other and that the confusion of love languages is quite far from the easy and relatively banal metaphor we assume it to be.<sup>13</sup> Ibn 'Arabî makes the point with conspicuous clarity in the midst of a discussion of how rational arguments, philosophy and «positive» religion are inimical to understanding what it is to love God:

...It is He who in every beloved being is manifested to the gaze of each lover ...and none other than He is adored, for it is impossible to adore a being without conceiving the Godhead in that being ...So it is with love: a being does not truly love anyone other than his Creator. (Corbin, 146).

The principal interpretative difficulty resides in the fundamental parameters of interpretation itself — at least as we have come to define it in modern Western culture and as we tend to apply it reflexively, that is in the very strong tendency to wish to «make sense» of a text. Thus, the exegesis of «courtly love» poetry has been shaped, overwhelmingly, by the introduction of rational explanations for the lack of fulfillment of the love of the Poet/Lover, everything from the Lady's insensitivity to her married state or her isolation on a far Mediterranean shore. But, as I have elaborated elsewhere, this explanatory mode files in the face of the text's most conspicuous assertions of purposeful unhappiness.<sup>14</sup> And in the case of Llull's or Ibn Arabî's stark verses the

<sup>13</sup> In Smith's analysis of Llull's views of the troubadours and particularly in his comments on this issue as it emerges in *Blanquerna* (5-6) we can see that Llull is most insistent not only that the converted *juglar* is still, first and foremost a *juglar* but, even more critically for my argument, that the *juglar* who is (also) singing about God is in fact fulfilling his original, divine function.

<sup>14</sup> See Menocal 1987, chapter 4. I include here an examination of the Arabic *muwassahât* with Romance *kharjas* which, in my opinion, provide a startlingly explicit example of the necessary and purposeful unhappiness of the love song.



further, clearly purposeful, confounding and confusion of the identity and persona of the Beloved, is no less blithely «resolved» in an exegesis that, again, explicitly denies what the text has no less explicitly put forth. In both case, ironically, this assertion of the metaphorical principle is made in a peculiar vacuum for Ibn 'Arabî as a Muslim, and Llull as a superb Arabist, were thoroughly steeped in the astonishingly powerful Koranic cult of Language and the Word, part of a tradition at least as Logocentric as the equally unorthodox (and Andalusian) Kabbala. In both cases it would seem far more appropriate to see these critical fusions as the difficult (because antiempirical) images of a theophany, images meant to confound and thus provoke contemplation and ecstasy. As in the other great mystical tradition, zen, it is understood precisely that revelation follows from images and propositions that are confounding — and conversely that understanding is completely blocked by the application of traditional, rational and intellectual exegesis. Thus, the subsidiary question that begins to emerge, in fact, is whether there can be an exegesis or criticism truly appropriate to this kind of hermetic poetry, poetry that would appear to be constructed precisely as a counterpoint to the rational paradigm. If we take the poetry at face value, in other words, if we follow both Blanquerna and the elusive spirit both contemplating and being the doves perched on the arâk and bân trees in reveling in and accepting hermetic poetic language and its flaunting of impossible contradictions as the triggers for elevated and unsayable contemplation, what form of exegesis does remain open to us? What enlightening and articulable meaning is left, in other words, in the imagistic and theophanic language that has shut the door, as hard as it can, to exegesis — precisely because exegetical language, the language, of course, of the mainstream and legalistic traditions of both Christianity and Islam, is radically inimical to the

essential iconoclasm of such mystical poetry and can only dim and destroy its (potential) spiritual magic?<sup>15</sup>

It is precisely in an attempt to confront this question that I have chosen to look at Llull and Ibn 'Arabî together — not because one depends on the other but rather because, as I tried to suggest at the outset, they are both children of the same storm. For, perhaps paradoxically, I would argue that the best reading reading we can do of this poetry, that which does least violence to the hermeneutic distance it wishes to create with all readers except the true believers (who, of course, scarcely need our critical comments), is one that reunites it with its peculiar and highly complex historical circumstances. And the salient, relevant features of the century that is framed by the Muslim mystic at its outset and the Christian one at its end are appropriately paradoxical: this is, firstly, the era of that staggering flourishing of intellectual communion among the three cultures (and the vernacular as well as the classical languages), the age of translations so significantly represented by Llull himself, who writes his philosophical masterpiece in Arabic — and then translates it into Catalan, giving that language its principal model for a prose style for centuries to come. But, in what one might call a contradiction if we subject the discourse of history to the same post-Cartesian analysis we do so much literature, this is also quite unmistakably the edge of the madness of civil hatreds that would be used to carve out

<sup>15</sup> In fact, multiple ironies abound in the exegetical tradition of these texts. On the one hand, it is openly recognized that these poets fall rather clearly outside the orthodox mainstream and in a difficult mystical corner of their respective religious traditions — so much so, for example, that the hermeticism of Ibn 'Arabî's poetry is ascribed at least in part to the need he had to mask unorthodox and suspect thought. But, on the other hand, to say this and then to go on to «decipher» the poetry in fairly standard and articulable theological terms is to falsify the presumed principles at hand. In this case, as in most others involved with these purposefully difficult poets the standard explicatory mode is rooted in a denial of the primary basis for the difficulty.



the modern states and their exclusive languages. One might see, in fact, that the almost hysterical interest in and proliferation of translations from the Arabic was far more than the calm before the storm — the storm, of course had already begun and was close to being in full force and the translations were merely a treacherous stowing away of supplies. As intolerance bred intolerance, inevitably, the ugliness of the Almohads and the Amoravids, each in turn potentially only a dark lapse, became permanent on all sides. Again, Llull himself serves as the best poetic image, history's own poem: he was stoned to death in Tunis preaching not just conversion but a union and re-union of opposites that no one could understand any more. Ibn 'Arabî, no less, is drenched in such contradictions, bred in the old capitals of multi-culturalism that themselves had bred, perhaps inevitably, a cultural relativism that, like Llull's pacifism and Ibn 'Arabî's pantheism, would soon be seen as madness.

In the midst of such violent and drastic historical contradictions the unions of (what seem to us) paradigmatic opposites in the writings of these poets on the edge make far greater sense — certainly not because the differences are thus rendered less irreconcilable but precisely because in the explicit paradoxes of history we see reflections of the tensions that inform this mystical poetry and of the images of seemingly impossible unions that fill every contemplative verse of Llull's Book and every line of that poem that begins, after all, with an evocation of a bird that has always evoked both secular and sacred loves. In such a critical context, I believe, we can point to the ways in which the multiple ambiguities and paradoxes within the texts are tied to each other in a chain-like fashion: the Beloved is always an Other — and the painful love of Others is the painful love of God — and the union of love thus constitutes the ultimate challenge to the self (whether the external and transient manifestation of the self is the flesh and blood lover

vis à vis the object of carnal desire, or the Christian vis à vis the Muslim, or the supplicant vis à vis the Lord). The Beloved, within the context of a difficult and fading multiculturalism, may well emerge as that ultimate theophany, all Others — and the Love poetry of the poets of such circumstances may well play back what we can scarcely hear in periods defined by different tensions. Can we not almost hear Llull, before the first stones are cast, talking about how the peoples of the Book all really believe the same thing, ranting about how his Lover is God, about how these are all the same thing?

As literary critics, clearly, we cannot articulate (even assuming we can know) the personal revelations that these texts are meant to provoke. But, on the other hand, we can certainly reject the cartoonish misprision that mystics, and thus their lives and poetry, lie outside the paradigms of history itself, that they are largely or completely devoid of social and historical dimensions. I would argue, in fact, that the examples at hand — and others at only a slight remove<sup>16</sup> — suggest that it is in history itself we may be able to get the best grip on what this highly hermetic poetry suggests quite publicly. If mysticism were indeed devoid of a social dimension Llull would never have been stoned, Ibn 'Arabî would not be made to seem so orthodox — and others would not have been tried for heresy or banished as traitors, or locked away as madmen. On the contrary, it is precisely in the often violent nature of the reaction (and I would argue further that rendering mystical and hermetic poetry «intelligible» through orthodox exegesis is a very violent reaction) that we glimpse the startling power of the Love poetry and the urging of a contemplative and peaceful hermeneutics of the *Book of the Lover and the Belov-*

<sup>16</sup> Llull and Ibn 'Arabî are from time to time referred to, of course, as «precursors» of the more famous and more studied Spanish mystics San Juan and Santa Teresa — children of another Spanish century, one may note, also remarkably paradoxical in its embrace of darkness and light.



*ed* and «O doves of the arâk and the bân trees...» The hermeticism itself is an act with a critical social dimension in its refusal of exegesis since exegetical discourse, of course, then and now, is the language of orthodox power, the «rational arguments of philosophy» and the «positive religion» that Ibn 'Arabî condemns as unable to understand what the real language of Love might be. (Conversely, logically, hermeticism is perceived as something to be mastered — a (perhaps) tough nut to crack — rendered «intelligible», i.e. subservient to rational discourse). And when the world all around is calling for clear distinctions, loyalties to Self and hatred of Others and, most of all, belief in the public and legal discourses of single languages and single states what greater threat can exist than these voices that reject such easy orthodoxies — and their readily understood rhetoric — and urge the most difficult readings, those that embrace the painfully impossible in the human heart? Lo, as Ibn 'Arabî says, how wondrous is a garden in the midst of fires! Or, as Llull tells us to contemplate on the 27th day of our year:

The bird sang in the garden of the Beloved. The Lover came and said to the bird «If we do not understand one another in speech, we can make ourselves understood by love, for in your song I see my beloved before my eyes».

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