Integrating the Writings of the Western Sephardic Diaspora into the Literature of the Spanish Golden Age

The central predicament of early modern Conversos, both inside and outside the Iberian Peninsula, lay in the fact that they inhabited a cultural threshold.

(Graizbord 2004, 2)

The following reflections briefly address my particular field of research, Spanish Golden Age literature, and in this field, a specific corpus, the literature of the Western Sephardic Diaspora, which I believe presents an illustrative case-study for the purposes of this publication, itself stemming from the International Symposium that preceded it, namely, a reflection on the rich multilingualism and polyphony of Jewish literary writing and the integration of Early Modern and Modern Jewish literary studies into the different philologies.

The students and scholars of Spanish literature, being participants and heirs of a common cultural legacy developed over centuries within the borders of the Iberian Peninsula, inhabit a symbolic universe populated by subtle, invisible, even painful divisions; divisions best expressed in the two separate phrases: the Golden Age in Spain and the Golden Age of Spain. Two innocent prepositions separate two worlds, which have frequently ignored and even denied each other.

At the beginning of my academic career in Israel, I realized, to my surprise, that when speaking of the Spanish Golden Age before non-Spanish-speaking circles, I had to clarify that I was referring to Spain of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and not Spain of the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, the latter being the period that constitutes the centre of interest for the Jewish academic world. And of course, the opposite was equally true – although there is an awareness that during these long ago centuries a Golden Age in Jewish history took place on the Iberian Peninsula, they never acquired a place in the institutionalized body of the Spanish academy and its literary canon. This is evident, for example, when reviewing the official curricula of Spanish schools and academic institutions. Ibn Gabirol, Ibn Ezra, Al Jarizi, Yehuda ha Levi – the latter being in fact the first known author of verse in incipient Castilian, included in his jarchas – all these constitute a history of manifest, I would say, shouted silences. Golden centuries erased by other golden ones. Semantic paradoxes and negations, yes, but also appropriations, displacements, and, fundamentally, silent and latent syncretism in what we can consider the in-between, liminal condition of Spanish Jewish literature that is my case study here, the one developed...
after the expulsion of 1492, and, more specifically, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in northern Europe (Fine 2013).

Seeking to overcome the binomial ‘center/periphery’ frequently applied to Jewish literature, historian Sander Gilman (1999) replaces it with the notion of a “border space”, a place defined neither by the center nor by the periphery but by a constant confrontation located in the margins. Gilman describes this frontier as “terrain-in-the-middle”, a “middle ground”, a diffuse zone in which different sociocultural entities dialogue, juxtapose, and confront each other. In this dynamic, it is inevitable that each of the agents, voluntarily or involuntarily, will be “contaminated” by the content of the other. The border space is therefore dialogical, plural, conflictive, and, I would say, of an extreme creative richness.

To this intermediate space it is also necessary to add and consider the dynamics of memory and oblivion as constituents of the Jewish experience and identity. Hispanic Jewish and Converso writing after the expulsion constantly refers to a paradoxical dynamic of experiences and content from other times, places, and languages; a paradox that was designated by Yosef Haim Yerushalmi (1989) as “the memory of what was already forgotten.”

Stemming from these brief conceptual reflections, I choose as a paradigmatic example of the border, in-between, and paradoxical dynamics in Spanish-Jewish literature one that has been the object of my research for the past several years: the literature of the Jewish Iberian Conversos, and within it the literature of the so-called “new Jews” (Kaplan 2000) that emerged in northern Europe, especially in Amsterdam and Hamburg, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These writers of Converso origin who embraced Judaism outside of the Peninsula wrote predominantly in Spanish and also, to a lesser extent, in Portuguese. Despite this, most of these writers have been left outside the paradigm of Spanish Golden Age literature (and, evidently, also that of Jewish literature). Let us remember that all these authors returned to Judaism after having lived as Christians for several generations and been nourished by the cultural and religious legacy of Catholicism. Their writings offer, among other levels of interest, the pronounced syncretism already addressed as one of the salient marks of this in-between literature of the border space.

These “new Jews” authors can be considered the last link in a chain of crisis and transformation processes: spanning the first conversion, the expulsion, the second forced conversion of 1497 in Portugal, the inquisitorial persecution, the new and conflictive conversion to Judaism, and, in general, the successive migrations, acculturations, and identity dualities. Daniel Leví de Barrios, João Pinto Delgado, Menasseh Ben Israel are the best-known of these writers, but they are not the only ones: Orobio de Castro, Saúl Levi Mortera, Isaac Cardoso, Samuel Usque, José Penso de la Vega, are some among the many others whose
names and texts demand to be integrated into the paradigm of Golden Age studies.

Moreover, this corpus bears witness to a case of cultural mediation, which the literature of the Conversos utterly exemplifies in the context of Early Modern Europe. It is a literature that is clearly representative of complex border processes: contamination, elision, recovery of memory. As mentioned, the dozens of works that make up this corpus were written mostly in Spanish by authors of Jewish-convert origin, who adopted Judaism after having lived as Christians for several generations, and who were totally immersed and educated in the Iberian culture. Passionately, these “new Jews” (or should we say renewed Jews) read, translated, interpreted, and, finally, rewrote their Hispanic literary and cultural heritage in a distinct way, and the results permeate the matrix of a deep cultural mestizaje. Itinerant writers in a border world (between regions, religions, languages), they not only maintained their ties with Iberian culture through the language in which they continued to communicate orally and to manifest themselves in writing, but also followed with much interest cultural developments on the peninsula, emotionally and intellectually anchored in the Iberian world. Although they had left the peninsula as undesirable inhabitants, they carried with them their cultural knowledge of the region and the past they left behind, especially in their language, their literature, and even their conceptual universe. It was in this way that they thus became, for nearly two centuries, true mediators between apparently divided and conflicted worlds (Fine 2013).

And yet. The literature of the Spanish-Portuguese Jews of the so-called Jerusalem of the North was ignored for centuries by Hispanic scholarship and even today is still perceived by a large swath of the academic milieu as a mere bibliographical curiosity without major impact. It goes unmentioned and unrecognized, for example, in the conferences of the International Association of the Golden Age and of the International Association of Hispanists, where up until the past decade this literature was notable only by its absence. A history and a literature in Spanish silenced and forgotten by Hispanic Studies; and one of many examples of that other broader and silenced literature, the Conversa.

In fact, the literature of the Western Sephardic Diaspora has remained almost entirely forgotten as far as the canon of Spanish Golden Age literature is concerned. One interesting exception is Menéndez Pelayo’s (1947, 285) brief but caustic judgment in the section of his monumental work in which he includes heterodox writers of Jewish origin: “Poets, novelists and writers of literature for enjoyment. Esteban Rodríguez de Castro. Moshe Pinto Delgado. David Abenatar Melo. Israel López Laguna. Antonio Enríquez Gómez. Miguel Levi de Barrios”. He adds, concerning this group of Jewish converted authors:
It was explained in an earlier chapter why our history should contain, even if only in passing, the Muslims and Jews who, after having received baptism, returned to their former opinions. [...] I will spend a bit more time on the Judaizing writers, because some of them were Jews in race alone and Christians in baptism alone, and ended up as freethinkers, materialists, or Deists, due to which they belong, fully and in their own right, in this book. [...] Certainly it might be said that of the many who have received baptism and dwelt among us, barely a single one of them was a true Christian. But their long residence among us, and the separation in which they lived from rabbinical centres, eventually meant that they were indistinguishable in knowledge, style, language, and artistic forms from other Spanish writers. Moreover, many of these New Christians, though Jewish by lineage, at the bottom of their hearts were not so in belief; indeed, often they barely knew the beliefs of their forefathers. Beyond a few superstitions, they were generally men with no religion or law whatsoever, a fact which explains the philosophical derailing of some Israelite thinkers at the end of the seventeenth century, such as Espinosa, Uriel da Costa, and Prado. (Menéndez Pelayo 1947, 286)

In this passage, typical of Menéndez Pelayo in its derogatory tone and simplistic underlying assumptions, the Spanish scholar nonetheless indicates, presumably without intending to, the complex drives and underlying conflict present in so many manifestations of the bifurcated existential path of both the Conversos and their literature. Even so, Menéndez Pelayo insists upon denying nearly all aesthetic value to that literature, as well as any originality, merely highlighting that: “At most the work of certain poets is distinguished by its predilection for Old Testament themes; but the manner of treating them is no different, neither in style nor in rhythmic forms, from the one used by the Christian poets” (Menéndez Pelayo 1947, 308).¹

Spanish literary scholarship embraced Menéndez Pelayo’s perspective with zeal, so much so that even though a reevaluation of research on the expulsion and forced conversion took place by the end of the twentieth century among Spanish historians, there was no such process with respect to literary studies. As Juan Diego Vila points out, even though the centenary of 1992 encouraged an apparent revitalization of approaches to the problems of exile and forced conversions in the Peninsula five centuries earlier, “the process of historical revision did not have projects of equal strength and effective results in the literary field [...] practice that, as you can imagine, led to the progressive isolation of these critical debates as if they were radically different and estranged domains” (Vila 2013, 118–119).²

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¹ My translation.
² My translation.
Despite this profound academic silence, the rich corpus of Western Sephardic literature reflects a remarkable and unique literary process in its tenacity, its literary achievements, and its demand to belong: to these writers their Iberian belonging was indisputable.

As an example, I will refer to *Espejo fiel de vidas que contiene los Psalmos de David en verso* – a translation of the Book of Psalms by Israel Daniel López Laguna completed in the second half of the seventeenth century and published in London in 1720. This unique text awakens the critic’s interest not only from a literary point of view, but also as a testimonial narrative of persecution and Sephardic exile. It also reflects the complex project of recuperating the Hebrew Bible and its exegesis for those *Conversos* who left the Iberian Peninsula belatedly and had no familiarity with the Jewish versions of this text. Ultimately, López Laguna’s book reveals the essentially syncretic character that I believe is attributable to *Converso* literature.

The urge to translate the biblical text, especially the Psalter, was hardly unusual within Sephardic communities. A tradition initiated by the Ferrara Bible, published in 1553, the direct translation of the Bible from Hebrew into Romance languages would continue throughout the centuries. López Laguna belongs squarely to this tradition, participating in the project of translating the Hebrew Bible into Spanish for liturgical purposes (with the Psalter being particularly valorised by the Sephardic communities as a book of prayers) and as a means of reclaiming the Hebrew Bible through textual scholarship.

The work presents not a few compositional and aesthetic merits, while at the same time raising a number of questions. Not only is this a paraphrased translation of the Psalter, but the author is also putting on display his mastery of a wide range of verse forms inspired by the poetic paradigm of the Spanish Baroque, thus configuring a unique syncretic space, in which devotional zeal fuses with both the metric virtuosity of the Baroque and the immediacy of a testimonial narrative, as we will see in a moment.

López Laguna’s text also incorporates words ‘foreign’ to the discursive space of the psalms. A remarkable dialogue takes place between Old Testament idiom and a marked classical and mythological vein. By the same token, in addition to elements of Baroque discourse, those of the social context of the time also filter their way in. As indicated above, one of the work’s greatest aspects of interest is its undeniable testimonial value, as much individual as collective. This ‘Baroque Psalmist’ translates the biblical text into his contemporary context and personal life experience, especially in registering the mark of trauma.

In this oeuvre, López Laguna associatively melds not only the individual with the contemporary collective experience, but also the present trauma with the historical past of the Jewish people, striving to emerge as the voice of a na-
tion and of its history, legitimating the Converso experience of expulsion/forced conversion as one more link in the diachronic chain structuring the historical consciousness of the Jews as a people.

The complex rhetorical apparatus of this translation does indeed correspond to such a religious and ideological program. At the lexical-semantic level, López Laguna resorts continuously to amplifications, lexical permutations, interpolations, and associations, inscribed in either the paradigmatic or the syntagmatic axis (i.e. metaphors/similes or metonymies) and reinforced, in turn, by additional rhetorical devices, such as the frequent use of hyperbole. This compositional poetics presents itself as a rewriting of the psalms grounded in the individual and collective experience of a specific historical moment; and this moment is thus reactivated by being inserted into the continuum of the Psalter, whose own cyclical, reiterative structure and rhetoric are concomitant with the memory of Jewish experience perpetuated by and through it.

The work was written for an educated public that was familiar not only with the Spanish language, but also the compositional paradigms of Golden Age poetry; one that was able to appreciate the flexibility of the translator-poet’s verse and the scope of his aesthetic achievements. Certainly, for such readers this approach is effective and affective, presenting in an attractive form the biblical/religious contents with which they were to be instructed. Moreover, its inherent syncretism succeeds in harmonizing the classic Hispanic literature of the Christian cultural sphere with Jewish religious and exegetical contents, exalting what could be considered an essential ambition of the Hispano-Hebraic descendants of the Conversos and/or expelled: a double belonging in which both traditions are sustained and neither is annulled (Zepp 2014). López Laguna’s work constitutes, in this sense, a wide field for the analysis of such a paradoxical dynamic. His creative wager takes poetic nourishment from the vast storehouse of personages, histories, and situations recorded in the Hebrew biblical corpus, interpolating this paradigm into the main corpus of Castilian poetry.

More than a century and a half after the expulsion, the conversions, and the resulting cultural crossings, López Laguna exercises his office of translator using the entire range of voices constituting the Sephardic Diaspora as a multicultural polyphony, more particularly, within the Hispano-Portuguese tradition. The underlying foundation of this Hebrew book translated into Castilian, entails a convergence of multiples lines of influence emanating from the Hispanic cultural legacy. By the same token, the range of addressees the work presupposes, including both Jewish and Christian readers, incorporates the two ethno-religious spheres constituting the humanist landscape of Spain before the expulsion into a concrete situation of literary communication. An active space of ‘multiculturalism’ is thereby opened up, considering that, in a still Jewish but no longer Iber-
ian context, its sources remain carriers of Spanish and even classical materials. These distinct discourses do not merely coexist within the work as an academic juxtaposition. On the contrary, they develop complex, dynamic interrelations.

In this way, the *Espejo de vidas* is neither the product of a single governing intentionality nor does it present to the reader any unified, univocal signification, or any coherent, uncontaminated form. Rather, López Laguna’s translation belongs to an unabashedly ‘impure’ poetry of *Converso* literature, pointing to various goals and directions, configured according to various codes. This type of ‘contamination’ is a manifestation of dialogism. The words of those seen as wholly other are modulated in the voice of the lyric subject – at the same time as they shape the word of that subject.

Daniel Israel López Laguna’s Psalter can thus be considered a paradigmatic example of *Converso* literature in general and that of the Western Sephardic Diaspora in particular. It is, specifically, a ‘mirror’, perhaps, of lives, of trajectories, but above all, a space of heterogeneous voices, a space of multiple belongings that recognize and dialogue with one another, creating a scriptural *ethos* open to plurivalent readings.

For all these reasons, I view a critical reconsideration of the literature of the Sephardic Western Diaspora as well as the literary interaction of the Hispanic, Hebrew, Jewish, and *Converso* writings to be imperative. What is required is not only sophisticated analyses of specific works and authors but an inclusive and serious research effort to overcome academic and editorial compartmentation. This is necessary in order to achieve a much needed fertilization of our areas of studies, but also as a long overdue act of literary and historical recognition and repair.

**Bibliography**


