CHAPTER NINE
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MOSES DARĪ

How does one evaluate Darī’s diwan in the light of the Andalusian poetic tradition and within the context of Hebrew literary activity in the Muslim East?1 We may consider the aesthetic judgment that the great scholar of Spanish-Hebrew poetry, Jefim (Ḥayyim) Schirmann, gave in his contribution to Encyclopedia Judaica as representative of the traditional answer to this question:

In general, Darī’s technical dexterity surpassed his poetical gifts. While the language and structure of his poems are in the best tradition of the Spanish school, the contents often betray a lack of individuality.2

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1 Most scholars agree that the concept of “literary value” does not possess quantitative value so that it may be measured. Moreover, the exact nature of this value is a primary subject of debate among philosophers discussing the nature of aesthetics. See Sibley, F. Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics, ed. J. Benson et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Nevertheless, according to the absolutist there are immutable standards by which a work of art may be judged, such as originality. The relativist would rather contend that due to the subjective nature of the critic’s opinion and tastes (also depending on his or her cultural and sociological background) it is logically possible for two contradictory aesthetic judgments to be true. Moreover, sensibility changes from age to age, and what was regarded as a good poem in the Middle Ages may be thought much otherwise in modern aesthetics (and vice versa). See the lemmata on “absolutism” and “relativism” in J. A. Cuddon, The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms, 2 and 739.

2 Encyclopedia Judaica (1972): 5:1302–1303; (2006): 5434. Cf. U. Melammed (personal correspondence 27.11.2007): “By way of a genuine general evaluation, it would be proper to point out to the reader that from the viewpoint of the poetical and literary criticism of medieval compositions, Moses Darī’s poetry is highly variegated in matters of Spanish mannerism, and he does not forget about any poetical ornament or device that can be found in Spanish poetry. However, on the other hand, it is difficult to perceive with him a striking originality or innovation in this field, not in accordance with any kind of Karaite method nor on the basis of a new approach by the Eastern poets.”
One of Schirmann’s foremost disciples, Dan Pagis (1930–1986), offered a markedly different and, in my view, more satisfactory approach. He opposed using the Andalusian tradition as the norm for evaluating other poetical schools. His book *Change and Tradition in the Secular Poetry* presented the Hebrew literature of Christian Spain as an independent school with its own characteristics. In other words, Pagis did not portray the poetry of Christian Spain as an inferior, epigonic sequel to the poetry of Muslim Spain, but as a departure to a new style of poetry.3

Similarly, as discussed in the introduction, modern scholarship has often stigmatised the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Eastern poets as second-rate epigones and imitators of the “Golden-Age” Andalusian poets. Yet, despite this, future research should focus rather on their distinctiveness as literary heirs to Arabic poetics and poetry no less than to the Andalusian poetical tradition.

We should note here a recent volume, edited by Shlomo Berger and Irene Zwiep, which approaches the phenomenon of epigonism from a more neutral and more positive perspective.4 By introducing epigonism as a dynamic force rather than dismissing it as an inevitable, secondary stage in cultural development, the editors hope the study of the “epigonic” will finally rid itself of its apologetic tendencies. Rather than rehabilitating the quality of the epigones’ output, the included essays attempt to redefine their role within the cultural process *per se*. This rich perspective deserves greater exploration in future research on medieval Hebrew poetry in general, and on the Eastern poets and Moses Darʿī in particular.

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