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institutodarom@gmail.com
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"WATCHERS OF THE ARABIAN PATHS SHALL ASK"[1]: MESHULLAM DE PIERA, THE ARABIAN ADAB TRADITION, AND HEBREW PROSE IN POETIC GUISE.

"Los que observan las sendas árabes preguntarán": Meshullam de Piera, la Tradición Árabe del Adab y la Prosa Hebrea con Revestimiento Poético.

HAVIVAH ISHAY•
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Tel-Aviv Universituy.
ishayh@bgu.ac.il

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-9398-2397.

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Resumen: Meshullam de Piera escribió poesía ya en una época en la que ésta no era popular, pero él se resistió a renunciar a ella. Fue un poeta que comprendió, plenamente, el significado del Adab y que tampoco estaba dispuesto a renunciar al Adab. Sabía que su potencial audiencia no era un público lector de poesía. Por lo tanto, les ofreció un nuevo género: Adab con revestimiento poético que fue bien recibido por su audiencia.

Abstract: Meshullam De Piera wrote poetry in a time when it no longer is popular, but he refused to give up on poetry. He was a poet, but he fully understood the significance of the adab and did not want to give up on the adab as well. He knew that his potential audience was one of addressees who were not consumers of poetry. Therefore, he sold them a new genre: adab in the guise of poetry. The audience bought it.

Palabras clave: Meshullam de Piera; Adab Árabe; Prosa Hebrea; España Cristiana; Género Maqama.
Keywords: Meshullam de Piera; Arabic adab; Hebrew prose; Christian Spain; Maqama genre

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[1] Brody, 1938: 36.

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"The phenomenon of contact with Arabic literature is the formative phenomenon of medieval Jewish literature (in Hebrew and in Judeo-Arabic) over the course of some four hundred years, from the end of the ninth century to no earlier than the thirteenth century."[2] Thus wrote Rina Drory, and no one, it appears, would question the assertion. Such contacts did not cease with the transition to Christian Spain, even though Arabic lost its place as a part of the prevailing culture. In this essay, I will seek to stretch the recognized boundaries of the phenomenon to the post-Muslim era in general and to the poetry of Meshullam ben Solomon de Piera in particular.

Meshullam ben Solomon de Piera

Meshullam ben Solomon de Piera flourished in the thirteenth century. (He is known to have died after 1260.) He apparently lived in the city of Gerona and is also known by the appellation En Vidas the Sage from Gerona. Schirmann described him thus: "There arose in the northeast of Spain, in Catalonia, the most gifted of the Hebrew poets who participated in the great polemic surrounding Maimonides: Meshullam ben Solomon de Piera. … In 1922, Heinrich Brody delivered to us some of the works of this poet, and later, in 1938, he published all of his poems that he had been able to collect—forty-nine poems—in the Studies of the Institute."[3] "It cannot be denied," wrote Brody in the introduction to that collection, "that he was the finest of the poets of his generation. … His poetry is unconventional."[4] The poetry of de Piera, added Fleischer, can be viewed as constituting a new school of Spanish Jewish poetry. In his essay on the Gerona style of Hebrew poetry, he described the fresh approach developed by the poets of Gerona, accentuating the flagrant disdain that de Piera exhibited toward the classical rule that poets must arrange the interior of their long poems according to an unambiguous logic, as in the classical Arabic qasida and its Andalusian Arabic parallels: "Yet Meshullam de Piera, most of whose poems are long and complex, comprehensively ignores this rule. The interior of his poems

[2] Drory, 2021: 110.

[3] Schirmann, 1997: 293. For the poems in Brody's edition, seen. 1 above. Only one additional poem by de Piera has been discovered since the publication of Brody's edition. It was published by Schirmann in *Haaretz* on January 5, 1940, and subsequently in Schirmann, 1947: 114.

[4] Brody, 1938: 8.

routinely, almost flagrantly, exhibits utter disarray. His ideas appear suddenly, then resurface again and again. No subject, so it would seem, is treated comprehensively; to divide them into conceptual sections would be absolutely impossible. No more obvious or blatant deviation from the classical rule could be imagined."[5] I do not believe that there is any flagrant disdain here, although there certainly is disregard, for which I shall propose an explanation rooted in a different theory of classical Arabic literature—one more accordant with Christian Spain.

Arabic literature in Christian Spain

From the twelfth century, Arab culture was no longer present as a given or self-evident cultural context of Jewish society in Christian Spain. "There is evidence that a rift, both cultural and linguistic, did indeed develop between Arab culture and parts of the Jewish community there—those that had not immigrated from Andalusia."[6] At the same time, there is great momentum in the production of Hebrew translations of Arabic works—meaning, of Hebrew literature that used Arabic patterns and Arabic texts. Explaining this phenomenon, Drory wrote: "As a rule, it is to be remembered that the Arabic corpus here serves a cultural context that is Jewish and Provençal—that is, Christian and European—rather than specifically Jewish and Arab."[7] According to Drory, European Christian interest in the Arabic corpus, which drove and influenced Jewish interest in it, was oriented not toward Arab culture as something inherently valuable, but toward the body of scientific and philosophical knowledge that had been passed down from the world of Antiquity and preserved in the Arabic language. "This is a period of awakening interest in the sciences, in philosophy, in ancient wisdom. Arabic was above all the final vessel, perhaps the most accessible one, in which the texts of this wisdom had been preserved."[8] In the twelfth century, links between Christian Europe and the Muslim East tightened because of international commerce, the Crusades to the Holy Land, and the Reconquista in the Iberian Peninsula. Despite the religious zealotry, these developments bridged the gap between the Christian world and the Muslim

[5] Fleischer, 2010: vol. 3: 1286.
[6] Drory, 2021: 122.
[7] Drory, 2021: 122.
[8] Drory, 2021: 123.

world. The phenomenon of translations in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is a part of the same medieval renaissance that included a cultural revival in the sense of returning to lost achievements from the glorious past of a classical period, together with renewal, flourishing, and reshaping of both old and new knowledge.[9] In the Christian states of Spain, especially Aragon and Castile, there still were large groups of Arabic-speaking Jews, and neighboring them were many Muslims. Until 1492, the Muslim kingdom of Granada existed alongside the Christian states. "This multiculturalism in the Iberian Peninsula left Arabic as a living and useful language for some of the Jews of Spain until a late date", according to Ben-Shalom.[10] It should come as no surprise, he adds, that the patrons of translation in such locales as Provence would reach out to Jews living in Spain to order translations of existing works.[11] The process of translation was already underway in the twelfth century in Spain, as previously noted, and from the beginning of the thirteenth century onward, the field of translation was afforded paramount importance. "Though the Arabic corpus was of interest mainly because of philosophical and scientific works, there also was pronounced interest in belles lettres of the adab and maqama genres."[12] Works of belles lettres spread and grew popular. They memorably provoked criticism from poet Abraham Bedersi, who saw them as alien literature competing with the refinement of the Spanish poetic tradition.[13] Jacob ben Eleazar translated *Kalila wa-Dimna* from Arabic.[14] Yehudah Alḥarizi, in his *Maḥberot Itti'el*, translated the maqamas of Muhammad al-Hariri.[15] Abraham ben Samuel ha-Levi Ibn Ḥisdai of Barcelona translated *The Prince and the Monk* from Arabic.[16] *The Book of the Ethics of Philosophers* (Adab al-Falasifa), by Ḥunayn ibn Isḥaq, who was among the collectors of the most important and popular parables of

[9] Ben-Shalom, 2017: 449-451.
[10] Ben-Shalom, 2017: 446.
[11] Ben-Shalom, 2017: 447.
[12] Drory, 2021: 123.
[13] Ben-Shalom, 2017: 479.
[14] The translated work greatly influenced European literature beginning in 1251, when it was translated from Arabic to Castilian by order of Alfonso X of Castile. See Wacks, 2007: 86-128.
[15] Al-Hariri, Peretz (ed.), 1951.
[16] Ibn Hasdai, Habermann (ed.), 1950.

Arabic adab literature, was translated into Hebrew and became one of the earliest pillars in the translation of works by Arab and Muslim authors.[17] Yom Tov Assis offers a similar description, adding that until the close of the thirteenth century, all Jewish courtiers of the Hispanic kingdoms knew Arabic and some owed their rise to proficiency in that language.[18] During the thirteenth century, the Jews of Castile had a notable part in the translation to Castilian of classical Greek works previously translated to Arabic.[19] Many regulations of the Jewish community in Castile were written in Judeo-Arabic until the early fourteenth century. Among the broad public, knowledge of Arabic was indeed in persistent decline. Yet Christian Spain is known to have been a place where Arabic was not a foreign tongue to Jewish society. Many of the greatest Judaic scholars of Spain during the Christian era knew Arabic, wrote Assis.[20] Nahmanides (thirteenth century, Catalonia), one of the most prominent, included Arabic translations of challenging terms in his commentary to the Torah, attesting not only to his knowledge of the language, but also to knowledge of the language among his contemporaries, for whom the commentary was intended. "There can be no doubt," wrote Assis, "that the use of Judeo-Arabic among Jews living under Christian rule in the Iberian Peninsula stemmed from the recognition that Arabic culture was supreme and that they, educated Jews, were its standard-bearers, even when no Muslim elite remained around them."[21]

We cannot say with certainty whether de Piera was familiar with Arabic. Therefore, I prefer to assume that he was not. Given the large inventory of translations available in his time, he could have been indirectly familiar with Arabic poetry, maqamas, rhymed prose, and adab literature.

Arabic adab literature

Adab, a classical genre of prose, is one of the most elemental aspects of Arab culture. Adab appeared as a branch of literature in the ninth century and blossomed in the tenth and eleventh. It includes belles lettres, ethics, historical information, scientific knowledge, aphorisms, parables, and

[17] Concerning this and other translations, see Ben-Shalom, 2017: 478–482.
[18] Assis, 2012: 66.
[19] Assis, 2012: 75.
[20] Assis, 2012: 78.
[21] Assis, 2012: 79.

religious dicta. "Adab means taking a smattering of each field of knowledge."[22] Adab signified not only a certain ethos of elegance and refinement, but also a large amount of knowledge in the areas of religion, tradition, poetry, grammar, philosophy, and the sciences. It was by dint of knowledge in these areas and the ability to demonstrate that knowledge orally and in writing that a person was considered to be educated. Within this system, there was a place of honor for learned parables and catchphrases, which the educated man was expected to quote at appropriate times and with proper timing in his everyday speech. Whoever remembered more and could use what he remembered more astutely was considered more educated. The adab, which was originally a matter of oral give-and-take, later left its mark on the style of writing done by the aristocracy, the senior bureaucracy, and the Arab learned elite. Authors who set out to write on any given topic did their writing inside the bubble of these learned classes' communications. They included in their writing a wide range of writing patterns and forms of style: lyrical prose, rhyming prose, poetic verses, and quotations gathered from across all of Arab culture. All of these entertained the reader, in addition to teaching him wisdom and providing him with a general outline of some subject.[23]

More than anything else, as a literary genre, adab is a display of virtuosity in learning and the ability to demonstrate as wide and varied a range of knowledge as possible. The adab author varied his writing with lyrical verses by famous poets, and seasoned his work with piquant anecdotes about great thinkers, artists, and kings. He accompanied these with a multitude of aphorisms and learned parables in prose and in poetic form. The *adib* does not see the reader as being in a rush to arrive at the declared subject of his work, so the route he takes is indirect. He accompanies his reader along a winding path, and only after detours brief and lengthy does he return to the subject—but not for long. To the adib (and to the reader), these detours were no less important, and sometimes even more important, than the declared subject. There are those adab authors whose practice is to offer a flowing discourse, embellished here and there with spoken Arabic, to impart to the reader something of the flavor of a story told spontaneously. The classical adab—or in the words of Albert

[22] Arazi, 2002: 93.
[23] Sadan, 1981: 1-7.

Arazi, "the form of the adab in its stage of ripe maturity—is a genre that contains within it belles lettres, ethics, various bodies of knowledge, religious dicta, and historical information from the Arabic treasuries of the humanities and from translations of important works originating in various cultures. … From this matrix of assorted materials, they succeeded in constructing a true work of art."[24] The classical adib therefore excels in his ability to expound on the vagaries of life using examples and parables drawn from poetry, society, and history. The adib expands the knowledge of the reader not in the way of science, but through aphorisms and learned parables in prose and in poetry. Parables and ethics never evolved in Arabic literature into an independent poetic genre. They served as a means of adornment in the repertory of those wishing to be counted among the educated or to author works in the style of the adab.

Traces of the adab in the Hebrew literature of Muslim Spain

Samuel Ibn Naghrela (993–1056) entitled his collection of learned aphorisms *Son of Proverbs* (Ben Mishlei), indicating a conceptual affinity with the biblical Book of Proverbs. His son, who copied the book, states in his introduction that it contains "principles and concepts taken from the learned dicta of the various peoples and the disparate nations, found in their books and fluid in their mouths … together with his creations."[25] *Son of Proverbs* contains nearly one thousand two hundred parables. Abramson terms the work as Ibn Naghrela's "mind's garden," because "it is multihued like a garden,"[26] encompassing wealth; friendship; education; wisdom and folly; good and evil and their recompense; fear of God, of a king, or of a ruler and his authority; the work of kings; generosity and stinginess; speech; silence; action; women; children; friends and enemies; righteousness and justice; consultation and counsel; honor; admonition; and truth. *Son of Proverbs* belongs, according to scholars,[27] to adab literature. Also of that literature is *Choicest of Pearls* (Mivḥar ha-Peninim), attributed to Solomon Ibn Gabirol,[28] which was translated to Hebrew by Judah Ibn Tibbon in 1167

[24] Arazi, 2002: 93.
[25] Ha-Nagid, Abramson (ed.), 1948: 3-4.
[26] Ha-Nagid, Abramson (ed.), 1948: 15.
[27] Levin, 1963: 255–256; Razahbi, 1956: 301-322.
[28] Razahbi, 1988/1989: 273; Razahbi, 1987/1988: 97-160.

and on which Joseph Qimḥi based *The Sacred Sheqel* (Sheqel ha-Qodesh).[29]

Refugees from Muslim Spain who arrived in Spain and Provence in the twelfth century brought with them the Arabic adab.[30] Masterpieces of Arabic adab literature were translated into Hebrew, as noted above, and works in the style of the Arabic adab were written in Hebrew. Ibn Sahula, for example, wrote *The Parable of the Ancient One* (Meshal ha-Qadmoni) in the late thirteenth century, while Ibn Falaquera in the same period wrote *The Ethical Epistle* (Iggeret ha-Musar) and *The Book of the Seeker* (Sefer ha-Mevaqqesh), among others.[31]

Traces of the adab in the poems of de Piera

I will again quote the above comments by Fleischer, in his article on the Gerona style of Hebrew poetry, about de Piera: "The interior of his poems routinely, almost flagrantly, exhibits utter disarray. His ideas appear suddenly, then resurface again and again. No subject, so it would seem, is treated comprehensively; to divide them into conceptual sections would be absolutely impossible. … The sometimes wild associativity that guides this process in the poems of de Piera stamps them with an almost romantic imprint (if the use of an anachronistic term is to be permitted in this context)."[32] I read those remarks by Fleischer time and again, and I feel as if I am reading a paragraph that perfectly describes Arabic adab literature. Elsewhere in the same article, Fleischer addressed himself to the approach taken by de Piera with regard to the system of motifs conventionally found in Spanish Hebrew poetry: "The system of conventions attending the Hebrew poetry of Spain was established in the early eleventh century and became progressively institutionalized through the works of its great practitioners. Yet in the works of de Piera, there is no posture of respect toward those fixed motifs. Obviously, he is aware of their existence, and sometimes he even engages with them. However, beside them in his poetry are a profusion of concepts, images, dramatis personae, and novel means of

[29] Razahbi, 1961: 114-122.
[30] Ben-Shalom, 2017: 484.
[31] Refael-Vivante, 2017: 18-19.
[32] Fleischer, 2021: 1286.

expression. Never can his poems easily be assigned a genre." [33] Nonacquiescence to a fixed system of motifs and lack of genre specificity is an outstanding way to describe adab literature.

"Sometimes he does not apply himself to connect one idea to another," Brody writes of de Piera. "The ideas come in quick succession, neither as gemstones connected by a single strand into a necklace nor as a row of cedars each of which stands on its own. He expresses his ideas in brief language, with a polished style, and many of these are fit in terms of content and form to enter a treasury of aphorisms and learned parables."[34] Brody complains, as it were, of the difficulty of understanding the poems of de Piera. In doing so, he unwittingly distinguishes between poetry and prose precisely as did the critics of Arabic literature.[35] In essence, he states that the works of de Piera are not poetry, but prose. I will seek to demonstrate below that this distinction depicted by Brody, which neither he nor others have given due consideration, epitomizes the poetic path of de Piera. His vessel is poetry, and the content of that vessel, adab.

József Patai wrote of one poem by de Piera, "Here as in the majority of his poems, he skips from one matter to another, rapidly plunging into the deep, sometimes from lofty height precipitating to bottomless abyss."[36] Patai, too, without intending the adab, described the approach of de Piera as that of one adept in that writing style.

The eclectic deployment, in the adab, of Arabic literature extending across a great many fields brought about a blurring of boundaries between genres. It engendered an approach that applied the same measures to texts sacred and secular, to poems of complaint, mockery, love, and lament. As a result, added Arazi, "not a few theorists cast doubt on the very existence of genres within literature."[37] The Arab theorists of the Abbasid era drew a sharp distinction between poetry and prose. An artist of expression, they held, cannot excel at one and the same time in both the field of poetry and that of prose, because those two fields are at odds with each other.[38]

[33] Fleischer, 2021: 1288.
[34] Brody, 1938: 9.
[35] الجرجاني, 2001: 28. ابن الاثير, 1939: 44.
[36] Patai, 209.
[37] Arazi, 2002: 94.
[38] Arazi, 2002: 95.

Meshullam de Piera succeeded in incorporating the treasures of prose within the style of the adab. He fully understood the significance of the adab for intellectual and practical life, and through his poetry, he conveyed this significance to his audience. “Adab is not a part of literature,” wrote Arazi, “but extends far beyond it. Medieval society, understanding as much, defined it as one of the pillars of culture, and the source of the wealth of the humanities. Any person who reduced the adab to a mere genre might have the temerity to strip it of its crown.”[39] The adab endowed the educated Muslim with expertise in numerous fields, an eclectic assemblage of knowledge, and the ability to expound on the vagaries of life through aphorisms, words of wisdom, and parables.

De Piera himself referred to his poems as "parables". For example: “Persons of lowliness are depicted in my book / in opaque metaphors and parables”;[40] “They ask: Who has darkened the radiance of persons in a poem? / With the radiance of parables does their radiance shine”;[41] “And I shall not declaim concerning a loathsome individual any of my parables”;[42] “And far be it from me / to defile my parables …”;[43] “We shall declaim our parables to strengthen you”;[44] “Ease off of me / until I declaim my parables”;[45] “Wordlessly, / they tell me to hide away my books, / to hide away my parables from the sons of man.”[46] “He expresses his ideas in brief language, with a polished style, and many of these are fit in terms of content and form to enter a treasury of aphorisms and learned parables,” to quote Brody again.[47] I would add comments by Patai, who noted, like Brody, that de Piera wrote epigrams and parables worthy of inclusion in a treasury of learned parables: “Sometimes we read the poems of Meshullam as we would the parables of Solomon or the words of Ecclesiastes.”[48]

[39] Arazi, 2002: 110.
[40] Brody, 1938: no. 23, line 59.
[41] Brody, 1938: no. 43, line 47.
[42] Brody, 1938: no. 17, line 8.
[43] Brody, 1938: no. 24, line 63.
[44] Brody, 1938: no. 25, line 10.
[45] Brody, 1938: no. 40, line 16.
[46] Brody, 1938: no. 45, lines 12–13.
[47] Brody, 1938: 9.
[48] Patai, 209.

A parable, as defined in the Middle Ages, is "an analogy of one thing with another that also contains opaque things."[49] The kernel of the parable is a learned dictum fit to be a lesson or paragon. In the Middle Ages, parables served social, political, religious, ethical, and didactic purposes. Hebrew poets in the time of de Piera, such as Isaac Ibn Sahula, were well-versed in foreign works of parable literature, such as the *Tales of Sendebar*, *Kalila wa-Dimna*, and *The Prince and the Monk*. These works and others were familiar to them in Arabic original or as translated to Hebrew.[50] During the life of de Piera, poetry and literature ceased to be the purview of the social elite as they had been in Andalusia. They spread to a broad section of society, even as their character changed to gratify their newfound audience. Hero stories, adventure stories, animal parables, learned aphorisms, debates, and polemics entered the literary world in various ways. Pagis sees in this process the "popularization" of literature.[51] The audience, no longer tested for social standing, was a diverse one. As a result, the works written are subject to both surface readings and subtextual readings, and they possess concealed and manifest strata and address many subjects, from ideology, theology, and ethics to the pangs of poverty, the border between commendable thrift and disreputable miserliness, and the onset of old age. All the above found highly fertile ground in the Arabic adab and in the genre of parables that it included. From original works and translations in Arabic, they made their way into Hebrew literature. The poetry of de Piera thus did not seek to dispel the boredom of a pampered social elite, but no more was it intended to make life easy for its audience. "He does not want to disencumber the reader: one who wishes to understand his words must read attentively. The things that he says are like a pupa: the ideas hover over those things or are concealed and hidden beneath them, and one must search for them and extract them from their hiding place."[52] In keeping with Brody's instructions, let us search and extract from hiding the ideas in a few poems by de Piera.

[49] Qimḥi, N.D: 404–405.
[50] See Refael-Vivante, 2017: 169–171.
[51] Pagis, 1976: 173, 199–244.
[52] Brody, 1938: 9.

In Concerted Song[53]

In concerted song, with song of my dawn stars, / as night concludes, with light in all my directions,

As night concludes and darkness is expelled / and my lights rise from eastern extremity,

As my thoughts stir from slumber, / as my organs rouse from nocturnal sleep,

I welcome dawn with music / and meet morning with my songs,

And my hand braces lyre and organ, / and I guide my left along my strings.

I fasten the ties of drum and flute, / at times pulling and at times undoing my knots,

And I break out in joyous song and draw close the bow / to know whether my words will return to me,

To know whether they will comfort me in my wandering / in the land of wandering, the land of my sojourns.

I sing. My flute does not respond to me, / And my songs do not yet rejoice with their voice. (lines 1–9)

The poem begins with four elegant lines that vividly depict the dawn. The fourth stanza rehashes that description with two couplings, each of which employs a single root to produce two different meanings, while leaving no doubt: night has ended, and morning has risen. I "welcome dawn" and "meet morning," attended by the sounds of instruments and song. The speaker in the poem wants to sing. Yet on this occasion, the instruments do not accede. He is not even confident that his music and song can comfort

[53] Brody, 1938, no. 45: 105–108.

him while he is "in the land of wandering, the land of my sojourns." Before us is a lengthy poem of sixty-eight lines inscribed "to Rabbi Abraham the Prince," apparently Abraham Ibn Ḥisdai. Later, the speaker thanks the instruments for not listening to him and even the birds for ceasing to sing, because they thus wordlessly counsel him to hide away his songs: "Great is my appreciation toward them, for wordlessly, / they tell me to hide away my books, / to hide away my parables from the sons of man" (lines 12–13). It is fitting that he hides away his poems, because the present generation is unworthy of them. "In a lowly generation, whom should I attire in embroidery, / and in my time, whom should I crown with my crowns?" (line 14). The few who are worthy are the several friends of the poet (whom he names in lines 18–19, 55), chief among them his addressee. From here to the end of the poem, the speaker tells his readers of the upheavals of time in general and in detail, of advice that he receives and gives, and of his present condition and future hopes. There is not always a direct conceptual link between verses, but together, they all crystallize into rules governing various behaviors that are appropriate, and others that are not, in his eyes. For example (lines 52–54):

> Extract from the commotion the light of weight / and do not enter into judgment with my chosen ones.
>
> Make your eye as blind at times / and disregard on occasion my noble ones.
>
> Forget agony, and why do you scream? Behold, / my chief leaders have budded into young fruit.

Before all these items of advice, which are phrased in the imperative, appears the following instruction:

> Ease off of me; open your mouth, my flute. / Open your mouth, and let my words shine.
>
> Open your mouth in the name of Abram my prince, / him separated from brothers who is a crown among my crowns.

This request is made of one of the musical instruments that did not accede to the speaker at the beginning of the poem. Here he instructs it to accede and to illuminate his advice, both in the name of the direct addressee of the poem and in the name of the first of the tractates forming the Six Orders of the Mishnah, which discusses the laws of blessings: Tractate Berakhot. As stated in Berakhot 22a: "My son, open your mouth (to speak clearly) and let your words shine (for words of Torah are not susceptible to impurity)." The speaker's advice is comparable to words of Torah. Such self-praise, both manifest and veiled, is among the most conspicuous identifying features of the poetry of de Piera. He thus skimps on neither pieces of advice nor learned aphorisms, which in his view are no less than words of Torah. Some items of advice are linked to his personal experiences, but they are phrased in universal terms. He is the one whose heart was initiated into faith while he was yet young. For this reason, his heart can be tempted by no means to engage in any sort of degeneracy, even if times call for such conduct. He will find comfort from one trouble in another, sweetening the bitter taste with poison "as one who plays," as if he were unaffected. This is the advice that the veteran of life gives his readers: one who wishes to align his deeds with the desires of his time but whose heart is not tempted to do so must accept his misfortunes with joy as if the pain healed his wound (see Hoshea 5:13; lines 42–46):

> And inasmuch as my heart belongs to faith, / having been taught uprightness in my youth,
>
> And there is no way to hold onto degeneracy / and the children of the time have taken my glories,
>
> I comfort this trouble with that trouble / and sweeten with my bitterness my bitters,
>
> And as one who plays, I accept the upheavals / lest my oppressors say "Ah!"
>
> And I hold back, and my mouth is filled with laughter / as if the pain would heal my wounds.

Similarly (lines 26–29):

> And they said, A viper has no venom, / and there is no ruin in the mouth of my bitter plague,
>
> And there is no flame to the blade of my spear, / and there is no sword to the strength of my razor-edged sword.
>
> Salvations await me in the counsel of time, and but little, / and a roar shall be heard from my lions,
>
> But all my deeds are for the gratification of my era, / and the tops of my gates shall yet rise.

Time, cruel and beneficent, figures prominently in the poetry of de Piera. His thoughts about time are typically given universal phrasing, even when in the first person. Here he knows that time possesses a secret that can save him, and he is certain that his deeds are fitting in the eyes of time. Just as the gates of the Temple will open before the glorious King ("Raise, O gates, your tops"; Psalms 24:7), so will goodness find its way to his home. Therefore, he is unconcerned with what the degenerates say of him, even if in their view, the mouth of the venomous snake contains no venom, there is no destruction in the mouth of the plague, there is no flame to the spear blade, and death has no place in the scabbard. Power is possessed by time, not by man. The conclusion that emerges from this stanza and many similar stanzas in the poem is apt for any person among the living.

This poem, wrote Patai, "is a fit allegory for the poetry of de Piera, who can hold back neither himself nor his words. He lacks that certain art of the poets of Spain in its budding years, who recognized the power of parsimony in verse. He possesses prodigious imagination and feeling, and when he begins depicting the beauty of nature, he rivals the great poets, but in short order, his soul tires and the place of the heart is taken by the intellect, and inasmuch as he does not know how to be brief, he expands and continually keeps talking from one epigram to the next. From the poems written by Meshullam, we can gather thousands of epigrams, all of them deep, all authored by a perspicacious man of substantial experience, who beheld life

and in his wanderings contemplated the workings of the world with open eyes."[54] Indeed, a large corpus of epigrams concerning human conduct in the world can be gathered from the poems of de Piera. However, this is not because he does not know how to be brief. (His poems contain keenly incisive independent epigrams, evidence that he knew "the power of parsimony in verse.") Nor is it because he lacks the same art of parsimony that the poets of Spain had in their budding years. Rather, it is because his audience is a different one, his period is different, his goals are different, and the poetics that he purposefully constructs is different. The adab epigrams in Arabic literature were not created due to a dearth of capability or talent on the part of their writers. Adab literature was not one with the goal of deep learning, but one whose goal was to impart a broad education and good counsel for living a "proper" life.

Set Tongue[55]

Set tongue as smooth onycha, / and place in your tongue a bit of silence,

And become beloved of the entire generation as belonging to its kind / and to the learned one with increased ardor,

And walk in modesty with modest ones, / and take with strength high office over fools.

There are such afflictions as whose remedy is bitter victuals, / and sweets things exacerbate an ill.

The cure of the clod is justice and punishment / and a hand's staff and the strong arm.

Noble of spirit, flee from fools / and let your company be far from them.

In the company of the clod are many embarrassments, / and who has become beloved by a fool and remained clean?

[54] Patai, 209.
[55] Brody, 1938: 86–87.

> As a seal upon my arm is a man of grace, / one of wholesome mind whose company is sweet,
>
> And between my eyes is a covenant of brotherhood of modest ones, / with vermilion upon my heart inscribed.
>
> In sweetness of mouth is greatness for the great, / and presumption does no good for any honor,
>
> And all honor to him who waives his honor / and whose humility is cast by casting,
>
> And strife among neighbors awakens / out of abundance of jealousy, and a cry is heard,
>
> And he who shares greatness with his friends— / forever shall shared high office abide.

The entire poem is a collection of instructions, advice, and pronouncements concerning man and society, phrased evocatively, astutely, clearly, and with an unmistakable touch of social satire. The poem begins in the imperative with a three-line motto: Smooth (*ḥ-l-q*) your sharp tongue into one that engages in slippery talk ("An open grave is their throat; with their tongue they engage in slippery talk [*yaḥalikun*]"; Psalm 5:10), and silence it with a bit. Conduct yourself toward every member of the present generation according to his kind and his way. The way is not always the same one. This is what society demands (a criticism of society). He mentions three types of individuals, which he goes on to discuss: the learned, the modest, and the foolish. Each is to be approached with a different sort of conduct, and as a rule, there is a different kind of medicine for each illness. The speaker offers the correct medicines. The medicine of the foolish is justice and punishment delivered with a strong hand; one is to flee their shameful company to escape their punishment. One ought to love the learned, to hunger for their wisdom, and to sweetly vocalize their greatness. Toward the modest and humble, graceful individuals of wholesome mind who forgo honor due them, he has a special attitude (in this poem as in others). They are fit for all honor, their company is sweet,

and the covenant of their brotherhood is inscribed on his heart in vermilion (line 9), as in Jeremiah 22:14: "I built myself a house of great size … paneled with cedar and painted with vermilion." Vermilion is a fine dye that was used for special paintings and drawings (though the word *sheshar* may in fact indicate a different substance of such description). The poem concludes with the reward of the modest one, who shares his greatness with his friends: he will keep his position forever. Modesty is the ultimate high office.

"It is true," wrote Patai, "that sometimes we read the poems of Meshullam like the Proverbs of Solomon and the words of Ecclesiastes."[56] This poem is an example. The Proverbs of Solomon and the words of Ecclesiastes, too, can be placed under the rubric of adab literature, which included aphorisms, parables, and dicta from philosophers, learned men, and poets, as discussed above.

I Ask, and There Is High Office[57]

> For the nobles, humility is fit like / a scepter of Ophirian gold in a ruling hand.
>
> Let the bitter noble blend a little in his constitution, / for thus is the blending of galbanum and onycha.
>
> Why should he pursue pride, while yet / high office rests as bestowed upon his shoulders?
>
> Oh, would that someone give me grandeur to share, / that it be weighed in the balance of my mind!
>
> I would give to the modest of the time, not to those in whose / souls I find voracious craving,

[56] Patai, 209.
[57] Brody, 1938: 44–47.

> Who inflate themselves to be reckoned firstborn, / those whom counselors' convocation repudiates. (lines 7–12)

This poem consists of forty-seven lines. Its topics of discussion vary among self-praise, the great challenge of theodicy, and pride and modesty in society. In the above excerpt, the speaker discusses the degree of modesty that would be quite fitting for nobles (whom he cannot stand)—but this is an area in which they do not excel. The irony in these lines is unmistakable, even where they relate to the speaker himself and his lofty office. "I forget my grandeur not in forgetfulness, but / my soul glorifies in my modesty" (line 4). I appear to forget my standing and greatness when I act modestly, says the speaker, but in truth, I do not. It is only because my soul views such modesty as glorious. A noble always blends in his proud constitution a bit of modesty, like the blend that God instructed Moses to prepare (Exodus 30:34–35). The noble has no real need to pursue modesty, even for the sake of the glory in it, because authority and greatness are his without limit ("high office rests as bestowed upon his shoulders"). "And whatever my eyes requested," says Qohelet (Ecclesiastes 2:1), "I did not deny them." The speaker distinguishes between "the modest of the time" and those who pretend to be modest. If, he states, he were given the option of distributing greatness himself, he would give it to those "the modest of the time," rather than to those who display a voracious craving for modesty, "who inflate themselves to be reckoned firstborn," inflating themselves to look great and sizable, puffing themselves up with pride, seeking to take for themselves honor and greatness twofold (like firstborns; see 1 Chronicles 5:1). Their company is abhorrent not only to the speaker, but also to the learned ("counselors"). The speaker goes on to describe the inflated nobles and their deeds that repulse society. He compares them to nectar contaminated with putridity and to wine in a cup brimming with poison: "Enjoy the nectar contaminated with putridity, / or savor juice in a poisoned cup" (line 19). His conclusion is clear: "There will not suffer pride from greatness / those who suffer idiocy from the clod" (line 17). Better to suffer the idiocy of the clod than the arrogance of the noble who has greatness exceeding what befits him. On arriving at the challenge of theodicy, de Piera writes: "This question has been asked for all time, and there is none / who can elucidate it for those inquiring." That brings him to a series of reflections on society

and on life as a whole. Then comes a collection of philosophical aphorisms and dicta, some phrased in the imperative, which perhaps will provide assistance in coping with unanswered questioning:

> You trusting in apology, there shall not be cleansed / a soul that sins and apologizes.
>
> Undone is an iniquity atoned, if / you repent, degeneracy being forgiven.
>
> You have repentance to perform. Hold off a bit / so long as with blood is your sword polluted.
>
> You are good in deed, yet your tongue / might deprive you of some grace.
>
> A mark of slight deformity like a scab—and with it, / the grandeur of high office declines and withers.
>
> Prepare and arrange yourself until they say / your spirit emanates from modesty.
>
> One of many merits shall not with words make himself sweet. / How pleasant is a tongue that lazes!
>
> How much guilt toward wisdom does a person bear / if his lip is not accustomed to keeping quiet!
>
> Do not be excessively wise. Beware lest / your mind becomes separated from the people.
>
> And ask, and do not be ashamed to avail yourself of counsel of / enlightenment borrowed from those enlightened. (lines 30–39)

A person who sins does so while calculating that an apology will absolve him of that sin—but it will not. If a sin is atoned, it is as if it never happened, and if one repents of a degenerate deed, then it is forgiven, provided that the repentance is sincere and comes when the time is ripe, not when the sword is still soiled with blood. Be cautious with your tongue, because even if your deeds are good, your words can detract from your grace. Be cautious

with your high office, because any ugly thing, however small, could degrade it. You must prime yourself well so that others can say that your spirit was distilled from the very virtue of modesty. Speak little, because if you speak extensively about your actions, even if they are highly meritorious, your words will not be pleasant to those hearing them; it is better for your tongue to be lazy in its speech. A person sins against wisdom if his lips are not accustomed to keeping their silence. Be one with the people: you will not be considered wiser if you keep yourself intellectually distanced from others. The bashful do not learn: take advantage of the experience and knowledge of others.

"This poem is typical of our poet's style," wrote Brody of "I Ask, and There Is High Office." "He skips from idea to idea, and verses 30 to 40 have the appearance of a compendium of learned parables between which there is no connection."[58] Brody thus drew attention to the difficulties inherent in understanding the poetry of de Piera, who passes from one topic to another and does not take pains to connect one learned parable to the next. Readily discernible here yet again are the traces of the Arabic adab: an encyclopedic literature in which there is no connection between topics and that contains parables, aphorisms, prose, and poetry all of which offer morals bearing on the conduct of man and society.

Watchers of the Arabian Paths[59]

This poem consists of sixty-seven lines. It begins, in the manner of the qasida, with a complaint about parting (lines 1–8). It then goes on, without a transition stanza, to other matters: poverty and wealth, industriousness and laziness, wisdom and foolishness, generosity and miserliness. Finally, it arrives at the conclusion that one is always best advised to take the middle path— "A central way always set yourself, my brother" (line 60). It is best to be balanced in the mettle of one's actions and to select the intermediate way, because that is the good path: "How honorable are those who are good in the way of the aggregate / and one balanced in temperament of deeds as a whole" (line 65). Other human virtues, strengths, weaknesses, and desires are discussed throughout the poem in the style of the adab in an attempt to show the reader the way to fitting decorum and conduct that will improve

[58] Brody, 1938: 44, n. 1.
[59] Brody, 1938: 36–39.

his life. The poet accordingly has no need to connect one idea to the next, and he moves from one to another quite freely. "Suddenly he moves on to a different idea,"[60] exclaimed Brody. Yet this is precisely what is done in adab literature. By the same token, the pieces of advice and learned aphorisms are worded, as in the adab, in the imperative or else in generic, universal terms. For example:

> Come among merchants of embroidery and fine linen, / with traders trading agates.
>
> Profit and become wealthy and let your hand trade / chief spices brought from Sheba.
>
> Do not stand asleep and stunned like / many disconcerted by the business of the hour,
>
> For business will give you quickness; / through it will deep slumber be stolen from you. (lines 11–14)

One is well advised to keep company with merchants who trade fine linen and precious stones, to build a business, and to earn wealth.

> Draw back your hand, for assets are lovers of / a thrifty individual, and they reject the generosity of a man. (line 29)
>
> With a hand of thrift, hold back hands that / since youth have been accustomed to scattering property. (line 33)
>
> There is a blemish to generosity, for when one becomes lost, there shall become lost / his witnesses, and like smoke shall his praises cease. (line 51)

Shut your hand. Do not be profligate with your money, and do not be habitually generous. Assets remain with a thrifty person; there thus is good reason for the hands, which have been accustomed since youth to fritter

[60] Brody, 1938: 36, n. 1.

away property, to become thrifty. Besides, generous behavior is flawed, because recipients of largesse forget their benefactor and fail to praise his generosity (by dint of human nature). Generosity, he goes on, leads to poverty, and no one stands by a person when he becomes poor:

> How will those distant of heart draw you near on a day of / goodness! Yet how many redeemers will redeem?
>
> Every man by his wealth is esteemed, and by the rising of / a star in success do people rise.
>
> There is a thieving-plagued treasure in a pedigree with poverty. / How misguided are the poor, and how foolish! (lines 34–36)

Even those far from you will seek your closeness when times are good, but who will redeem you (in time of trouble)? The measure of a man is his wealth and success; a pedigree in which there is poverty is like a treasure in which there is thieving (or oppression; see Proverbs 15:16), and those impoverished become stupid. The speaker develops the idea, asking rhetorical questions for emphasis:

> Who is it who will advance you from your crying, / who among friends who will have compassion on your glory?
>
> Or who among friends will wake / when your fortune turns and they have greatness?
>
> If friends cover up days of error, / they are forgiven—and they have not been forgiven. (lines 39–41)

If you become poor, which of your friends will show compassion for your dignity? Which of them will do you any good when you cry? Or which will awaken to help you in your distress, when he lives in greatness and wealth? Will your friends forgive you for your errors? They will forgive you (when you are wealthy), but they will not forgive you (when you fall from greatness). On the other hand, being overly miserly is undesirable, because

that is the way of the degenerate: "Not to be thrifty in the fullest, I say. / Such is the case with the degenerate, and they act with degeneracy" (line 59). The middle way is the best way.

Brody entitled this qasida "On Thrift and Generosity." These qualities do appear, but alongside other qualities and numerous pieces of advice for the friend to whom de Piera sends the poem. The genre to which the qasida belongs is determined by the body of the poem. In this case, the body is heterogeneous, so that it cannot be assigned a genre with any confidence. "The eclecticism of the adab," wrote Arazi, "extends across every branch and exemplifies how the sacred and the mundane can coexist under the same banner. It has pronounced influence on the very conception of genre in the poetics of the Middle Ages. Ultimately, it even brought about a blurring of the borders between different forms and forged an approach that applies precisely the same standards to religious poems, complaint poems, blame poems, elegies, and travelogues."[61]

"In several of the poems of Meshullam de Piera," wrote Schirmann, "we find piercing discussions of generosity and thrift. One who is familiar with the manner in which the poets of Spain wrote knows that in these poems, de Piera alludes to the fact that he was compelled to seek out benefactors and patrons for himself."[62] Fleischer rejects Schirmann's view: "Whether this phenomenon can be explained with the conventions of the ancient tradition of secular Spanish poetry is doubtful. The poems of de Piera are not of courtly character, and it is difficult to presume that in Gerona of his day, a man of his standing could have had expectations of generosity from the moneyed. In secular poetry, praise of generosity appears mainly in laudatory poems and in poems bearing clear ties to the institution of the court. There are no laudatory poems of this sense by de Piera. A more plausible presumption is that the largesse in his poems is charity given to the needy. It is easy to presume that de Piera's popular religiosity esteemed this virtue."[63] Fleischer is in the right. The way of de Piera is not the way of the poets of Spain, his poems are not courtly in character, and he has no expectation of finding a patron in Gerona. I would add that the comments

[61] Arazi, 2002: 94.
[62] Schirmann – Fleischer, 1997: 293. For a list of the poems in which thrift and generosity appear, see Arazi, 2002: 94. n. 75.
[63] Schirmann – Fleischer, 1997. n. 76.

about generosity and thrift in his poems are identical to those in the Arabic adab.[64]

The Arab literary theorists of the Abbasid period developed a clear distinction between poetry and prose on the consensual basis of clearly defined formal criteria. In a letter dedicated to the subject, Ibrahim ibn Hilal al-Sabi[65] emphasized that an artist of expression cannot excel at one and the same time as a writer of poetry and of prose, because poetry and prose are at odds with each other. Meshullam de Piera was a poet, but he fully understood the significance of the adab and was well familiar with the addressees of his poems. He did not want to give up on the adab, because "adab is not a part of literature, but extends far beyond it. Medieval society, understanding as much, defined it as one of the pillars of culture, and the source of the wealth of the humanities. Any person who reduced the adab to a mere genre might have the temerity to strip it of its crown."[66]

"It is not impossible that de Piera understood Arabic," wrote Schirmann, "but we cannot prove this."[67] My assumption, as noted, is that de Piera did not know Arabic, but was familiar with its literature in translation. The adab was highly developed and highly widespread in his day, as we have seen, and he was aware of its importance and popularity. De Piera writes poetry in a time when it no longer is popular. "The abashment of Hebrew secular poetry did not begin in this period: it had been among the attributes of its existence since the destruction of Andalusia. However, in this period, its condition worsened and its already eroded foundations became further destabilized. It had fallen from greatness as the curtain fell on its Andalusian paradise; now it reached a nadir the likes of which it never had known."[68]

Meshullam de Piera refused to give up on poetry. He knew that his potential audience was one of addressees who were not consumers of poetry. Therefore, he sold them a new genre: adab in the guise of poetry. The audience bought it: "The poetry of de Piera deeply impressed his contemporaries, not only due to its prominent role in the debate about the

[64] Ishay, 2016: 11-22.
[65] Schirmann – Fleischer, 1997: 95.
[66] Schirmann – Fleischer, 1997: 110.
[67] Schirmann – Fleischer, 1997: 300.
[68] Schirmann – Fleischer, 1997: 321.

works of Maimonides, but also, and perhaps even more, on account of its quality and its novel style. … Poets of his time were quick to imitate him. Nahmanides, for one. For another, Meir ha-Levi Abulafia."[69] Another testament to the fame gained by de Piera and the esteem that he earned is the mention of him in "The Turning Sword" (Ḥerev ha-Mithapekhet), Abraham Bedersi's lyrical survey of the most important poets of the school: "And Omar Meshullam ben Solomon lyricized pleasantly; he acquired my spice and my myrrh."[70]

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[69] Berberian, 1982/1983: 37–38.

[70] Berberian, 1982/1983: 39. See also *Poems by Abraham Bedersi and Isaac Gorni and Their Circle*, facsimile edition by Habermann, 1968/1969: 16.

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