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## Santob: Poet at the Edge of the Abyss

Nelson R. Orringer

Events of the mid-fourteenth century produced supreme emotions in the Jews of Castile—exultation in their cultural accomplishments, dread that their enemies might sweep their values away, and faith in a merciful God as Protector and Defender of all that they had built with toil and perseverance. Joel H. Klausner has described the epoch when the death of Alphonso XI, under whom the Jews had prospered, brought to the Castilian throne his son Pedro<sup>1</sup>. This violent, headstrong youth, in the course of his nineteen-year reign (1350-69), was to earn the epithet "the Cruel." However, like his father, he surrounded himself with Jewish ministers. Many Old Christian aristocrats, proud of their own blood-lines, despised the new king for favoring those whom they considered *rahez*, lowly. Accordingly, they disputed Pedro's claim to the crown by calling him a Jew and by supporting the aspirations to power of his half-brother Henry of Trastamara. For the deceased Alphonso had sired a number of bastard sons who, led by Henry, barely learned of Pedro's coronation when they began plotting civil war against him and persecuting Jews. Doubtlessly Hispano-Hebrews at the king's court realized that to save their lives, their faith, their families, their brilliant culture and their vast economic holdings, they would have to go to battle for Pedro.

The most celebrated harangue to war, probably addressed to Christians and Jews alike at Pedro's court, appears in the *Moral Proverbs* (*Proverbios morales*) by the Rabbi Santob de Carrión. Called by the historian Américo Castro the most innovative piece of Castilian poetry for its time,<sup>2</sup> this book of pithy maxims, so little studied by Hispanists, appears to express the concern of a poet on the edge of an abyss, where he teeters, together with his coreligionists, between prosperity and oblivion. Because his individual problem bears so intimate a relationship with that of all Castilian Jews of this period, Santob willy-nilly becomes the spokesman for his people. The demise of the benevolent King Alphonso has left both him and them in an insecure situation. Scholars hypothesize that the rabbi has held a major administrative position, either at Alphonso's court, or in the city of Soria, and has extracted from him a promise of royal favor.<sup>3</sup> With the death of that monarch, Santob finds himself unemployed (ll. 105-6), with no assurance of receiving the favor due him (ll. 1461-2), and in addition somehow burdened with a certain debt to Pedro as heir to his late father's estate (ll. 13-4). Further, our poet is no longer a young man, as he reveals in the following lines, which we translate into English in approximately their original meter.

My gray hair have I tinted.      Yet abhorred it not a bit,  
Nor thought to refute it,      Not to appear young and fit.

But to assuage my terror      Of those who'd perhaps have sought  
In me an elder's brain      And would have found it not. (ll. 101-4)

To summarize, Santob is an aging man from an ancient people, both have undergone a sudden change in fortune, and both find themselves at the mercy of a young, capricious king to whom both owe a debt before he even acts to save them, and who, even if he does favor them, cannot guarantee their safety.

As the rabbi from Carrión skirts the border of the chasm yawning before him, his poetry apparently responds to his need for a balancing-stick. The aim of the present essay is to show that in the form and content of the *Moral Proverbs*, the author gives expression to a feigned self-confidence, tempered by a realistic awareness of his own limits. With his usual succinctness, he urges others to follow his example:

Let man work on as if      It were for him to choose,  
And not for any other,      Whether to win or lose.

And to console himself      Should travail yield him nil,  
He should remind himself      All lies outside his will (ll. 389-92).

Here Santob advises a bit of self-deception to keep moving forward, an illusion of being in complete control. In case of a fall, God wills it after man His creature has operated to maximum capacity. Indeed, as a work of art, the *Moral Proverbs* represents Santob performing at his best despite his helplessness in the face of destiny. He remarks that since he lacks gainful employment, he attempts to avail himself of his knowledge simply by expressing some of it (ll. 105-6). At one time, he attempted to improve his lot by keeping silent, but such diplomacy only worsened his situation. Hence he casts all modesty ("vergüenza") aside, then propels himself ahead (ll. 123-4, 127-8). For Fortune, that "wheel of heaven," keeps rolling, now dipping, but bound to elevate Santob. He rationalizes his unemployment by suggesting that the period of enforced relaxation will renew his spirit. The soft tambourine that he strikes at present will someday resound, bringing him wealth and honor (ll. 109-13).

Nonetheless, Santob knows that he is assuming a posture of self-assuredness which he in fact lacks. Too unconvincingly does he protest that he is worth no less than other Jews who receive gifts from the king (ll. 125-6). And in the presence of Christian listeners who may scorn his poetic sermon because they think him humbly born ("Rafez": l. 130), he accumulates concrete examples, after the fashion of other didactic poetry of the time written by the clergy,<sup>4</sup> to

illustrate his own principle that noble beings often have base origins:

For being born on thorns,      The rose is not, I reckon,  
Worth less, nor is good wine      If from the runner taken.

Nor is the hawk worth less      When born in a poor nest,  
Nor are good lessons bad      If by a Jew expressed (ll. 137040).

Therefore, although he has previously claimed to divest himself of all modesty, all shame, he practically has admitted his incapacity to do so. He also adds that people may take the informed man for a lowly one, but that if he saw his opportunity, he would convey his message with more elegance than his detractors do (ll. 147-50). Still, this rejoinder to his imagined critics falls short of denying his own lowliness. He always balances feigned boasts with some self-undercutting. Like any clerical minstrel of the period, he first praises his style in apparent seriousness; but afterwards he engages in subtle self-derision, typical of him and unconventional: "A very major message Takes few verses to state,/ A skinny sash can suffer Ribs of enormous weight" (ll. 145-6). This delicious irony juxtaposes the sublime and the ridiculous substantive doctrine and physical corpulence, poetic concision and a prosaic garment.

Santob's weighty message, carefully examined, amounts to advice to Christians, Jews, and Moors at King Pedro's court that life is radical insecurity, but that circumstances call for aggressiveness, a spirit of adventure against the monarch's foes. With his relativistic view of sublunar reality, our poet-rabbi finds it difficult to formulate truths about the world: what one man praises, another criticizes (l. 155); the same lance seems to its thrower to move lazily, but to its human target, to arrive swiftly (l. 159-60). The only constant in the universe is God in the heights (ll. 173-4), and in Him Santob believes, as well as in service to the just king (l. 229). Such a ruler cannot survive without servants. As Santob contemplates Pedro's court, he apparently sees everyone sunken into self-complacent leisure and prone to lavish wealth on festive functions in order to gain renown. To the wealthy idlers, he suggests, possibly echoing the Aristotelian Maimonides, that every good custom has its golden mean and to exceed it is to deprive the custom of its virtue (ll. 235-6). No virtue, though, lies in repose and procrastination. All too clear is Santob's meaning when he tells the would-be protectors of King Pedro, "Yesterday is as distant As the year just gone by/ For him destines to be Guarded from injury" (ll. 119-20). On the other hand, "A single shield inserted 'Twixt him and th' arrow's head/ Works as well as the world Placed betwixt them instead" (ll. 251-2). The time for pleasantries has passed. According to Santob, in this uncertain, shifting universe, sweetness is always laced with bitterness: "A rose cannot be plucked Without thorns 'neath the flesh;/ Honey is a sweet thing Whose bitter neighbors <sup>9</sup>i.e., bees<sup>0</sup> vex" (ll. 263-4). Finally, Santob snatches away the veil of metaphor and speaks plainly: "The peace is not achieved Except by making war;/ Nor leisure earned without Travail that comes before" (ll.



265-6). It causes Santob particular indignation to find spendthriftiness at court when the moment has arrived for sobriety. Generosity leads to overgenerosity. Santob likens the waster to a candle which, while giving light to others, burns itself out (ll. 297-8). Remarks the unemployed poet, only the king is entitled to spend without limits, since he is assured of never going poor (ll. 299-300). In any event, in so unsteady a world, Santob recommends that his listeners continually change their ways, thus conforming in their apparent instability to the way of all things (ll. 315-6).

Moreover, he poses an even more telling argument, of a theological nature, to spur his audience into action. He warns that the man who expects leisure without working and suffering for it commits a grave sin of pride against God. For God made man to be born for travail. And Santob extends this principle to all creatures. The stars, he notes, never stand still in the heavens. How suitable would it be for these spheres to keep in movement while man stayed at rest? Since the stars move in the service of God, man should follow their example, keep active, and thereby acquired honor in his community (ll. 393-403). On the other hand, Santob adduces an argument against idleness which shows the sophistication of his medical and psychological knowledge. The idle body, he affirms, causes the heart to toil, weighted down with care which leads it to malfunction (ll. 419-20). The upshot of this section of *Moral Proverbs* is that a will to leisure presupposes travail, and a desire for peace a preventive war (ll. 337-8).

Santob knows the proud but treacherous character of the enemy. At one point of his poem, the rabbi seems to raise his voice and to address to an unnamed, powerful foe a severe vituperation. It is not impossible that a "jeering song" has passed into the *Moral Proverbs*, a *cancion de escarnio* vilifying a concrete political adversary, perhaps even Henry of Trastamara himself: "You marvel and consider Yourself a lesser man/ For all towns of the kingdom Are not 'neath your command" (ll. 621-2). Unsatiated with his riches, the individual excoriated by Santob covets ever more, while unaware that such greed and the trouble it produces only profit others. Of the accumulated wealth, nothing will remain to him who has amassed it but a shroud to cover his bones; not the love of heirs, but only a foul reputation after his death. This notoriety is the result of evil deeds and false oaths ("mala verdat") taken both in public and private (ll. 623-30). The rebel against God's laws, according to Santob, forgets that he was created from a "filthy drop" of rotten matter, and that after his spirit leaves his body, the latter is worth no more than a mosquito (ll. 611-6). As a crowning humiliation for so vile a man, in all likelihood a partisan of Pedro's half-brothers, Santob urges him to follow the example of the king, who labors more in behalf of the people than the people in his (ll. 653-4).

To synthesize, a just monarch rules over the ideal kingdom envisioned by Santob, based on morally edifying labor, and ordered in harmony with a laboring universe. However, of all God's creatures only one, in Santob's opinion, escapes the moral imperative of travail—the sage. He acquires a good name in his community without toiling because the difficult task of studying

and teaching God's law offers fulfillment in itself with no expectation of any extrinsic reward. In a very real sense, human society exists to keep intelligence in movement, rather than the reverse. If, as we have shown, Santob displays the mentality of a man in a crisis situation, it is because he ultimately fears the disappearance of learning.<sup>5</sup> He incorporates into his poem the instructive response of a wise man to the disciple who inquired why he did not toil for financial wealth: "He [the sage] says, 'Why would I search For something which, once found,/ Would never satisfy me?'. . ." (ll. 519-20). From this rhetorical question, we must infer that the pursuit of wisdom does offer satisfaction, while from an express opinion of Santob's fictitious scholar (ll. 521-2), we learn that wealth arrives, not as a result of knowledge, good judgment, nor of cunning, but merely of good luck. In general, Santob mistrusts intelligence in affairs of daily living like politics and business. For human reason seeks a consistent principle on which to base itself, whereas the world, as Santob puts it, is not governed by a rigid rule (l. 357). He has therefore advocated plunging with adventurousness into political affairs, without taking them fully seriously.

The wise man's labor of exegesis, the interpretation of sacred texts, demands quite a different attitude, a joyous solemnity. At last Santob can point to something stable, human knowledge, whose very stability gives it worth in the eyes of this rabbi well-versed in the mutability of events. He lauds knowledge as God's gift, more valuable than any earthly treasure including peace after war, since learning endures (ll. 663-70). Because it acquires durability when set down in books, Santob lavishes praise upon the written word. Centuries before the same thought is to occur to Descartes, according to Castro (p. 555, n. 12), Santob views great books as conversations with the learned dead (ll. 673-4). The scholar can have the wisest of the wise answer his questions better by reading them than if he had them before him in the flesh (ll. 681-88). For according to Santob's theological metaphysics, man is fashioned out of two metals, one base, the other noble. The base, earthly one is his biological heritage, all that he shares in common with beasts; the noble one, making him like an angel, consists of his understanding and generates all his knowledge and virtue (ll. 492-99). The understanding, it follows, is perpetuated in the books he writes. With his understanding he achieves a relative immortality, a ceaseless capacity to reason with readers long after death has severed away the bestial portion of his being. Carrying Santob's metaphysical doctrine a step further permits an exact definition of the wise man and the fool: the former is precisely the man who lets his understanding guide his life; the latter, the man who falls a slave to the bestial portion of his being. Since from understanding comes all virtue, the sage is for Santob the good man; conversely, the fool is the bad man. Throughout *Moral Proverbs*, Santob employs one word (*torpe*) to denote both the stupid and the perverse, as if no distinction existed between the two concepts; and he uses the word for "wise" (*sabio*) or "wisdom" (*el saber*) as the autonym (See, e.g., ll. 700-1, 1231). We may simplify even further his antithesis of wisdom and folly: the first is concern with everything eternal; the

second, an obsession with ephemerae.

In a world of men and objects subject to ceaseless change, Santob admits that it is human nature to grow annoyed with what is long lasting (ll. 957-8). Nevertheless, he disdains for its fugacity pleasure gratifying the bestial side of man, while he praises for its ability to increase, never to be static, pleasure that delights the understanding. To illustrate, carnal pleasure has for its object a beauty that cannot be cultivated to last indefinitely. Writes Santob,

I once dreamed I was kissing  
That those within her dwelling

A beauty fraught with fear  
Would surely overhear.

I found her mouth delicious  
I never saw such sweetness

Saliva warm and fine,  
More bitter to leave behind.

It's a very deep secret  
Braggarts of worldly goods

That no one seems to know:  
Put on a senseless (*torpe*) show  
(ll. 63-70).

On the other hand, pleasure with a spiritual object can regenerate itself and increase. A delight imperfectly understood decays, while the true connoisseur, who comprehends what he enjoys, will attempt to make it last, grow, and prosper (ll. 989-90, 993-4). Friendship exemplifies durable pleasure when the friend, according to Santob, possesses understanding. Ideas pass back and forth between the two friends, and while pondering the other's thoughts, each one delights in being understood by his companion and knows that his own delight is being shared by this interlocutor. Finally, the understanding of both increases (ll. 971-6).

Since affairs of the material, biological world resist full comprehension, it becomes evident, from the doctrines hitherto exposed, that life acquires meaning for Santob from the learning and teaching of as much knowledge as he can obtain. But who could learn and teach without words? Language elevates Santob into the lofty realm of God's most secret laws, but also permits him to descend into his workaday community, where by preaching and conversing he can aspire to the honor and love of his fellow men. No wonder, then, that a substantial portion of *Moral Proverbs* treats eloquence, the wise and virtuous ways to speak. Always an advocate of the golden mean, Santob criticizes the extremes of loquacity and taciturnity. Man was born with a tongue for the purposes of speech (l. 1144); but the discreet courtier in Santob cannot deny the importance of keeping mum when the occasion demands. After all, part of communicating consists of listening, or else man would not be endowed with twice as many ears as tongues (ll. 1147-8). Once he has lauded polite silences, Santob turns the tables and begins enumerating the disadvantages of refraining from speech. His practice of inspecting the most contradictory



aspects of phenomena displays, not only an intellectual curiosity, but also a genuine conviction that knowledge is difficult to acquire, so that the mind must function with maximum flexibility. For a direct view of this flexible intellect in action, here appears a translation of part of Santob's praise of speech and scorn of keeping silence. Let us note the abundance of plays on antitheses, while not overlooking the rigor of the poet's thought, perfectly consistent with his theory of knowledge as previously outlined:

To speak is to make clear,	To hush, to keep unseen;
To speak is generosity,	To hush is to be mean.
To speak is to be swift,	To hush, lazy and still.
To speak is boundless wealth	To hush, an empty till.
To hush is turpitude,	To speak is to be wise;
To hush is to be blind,	To speak, to use the eyes.
Hushing is a body,	And speaking its soul
Man is what he speaks,	Hushing, his repose.
To hush is to be sleeping,	to speak is to awake;
To hush is to be crushed,	To speak, a stand to take.
To hush is to be backward,	To speak, to be ahead;
To speak, a sword; its scabbard	Is to retain unsaid.
Hushing is a great sack,	And the wealth it contains
Within itself is speech,	Which furnishes no gains
As long as it remains	Enclosed therein: no fame
Can come to anyone	Who to the speech lays claim.
Silence is called nobody,	It has no name nor can,
While speech indeed is someone:	It makes a man a man. (ll. 122-44)

If we substitute the word "knowledge" for the word "speech," the meaning of the quoted lines becomes patent. Knowledge is the solution of mysteries generously shared through language with others. At the same time, the articulator of those thoughts affirms himself as a wise and virtuous man, energetic and oriented by his understanding, alert, progressive, and devoted to realizing his potential for acquiring honor in his community. Such is the man whom Santob would of course wish to be. In fact, the repetition, the rigorous regularity of his speech-silence contrast, added to the praise of silence and criticism of speech immediately preceding the quoted lines in the text, cannot help but suggest that Santob is largely engaging in a word-game, speech for the sake of speech. He cannot take his poetic language fully seriously, because of his oft-repeated doctrine that the only self-evident truth is the existence of God. He may harbor an unconditional respect for knowledge as such. Yet for him to claim possession of such wisdom would not only go against a Talmudic prohibition,<sup>6</sup> but would also controvert the attitude of self-effacement which he manifests throughout his poem. At best, he takes pleasure in setting forth his rhyming antitheses as if he believed them unconditionally. They establish, with the rhetorical force they accumulate, a fictional beach-head of self-



confidence, like a sandcastle mounted above the undertow of radical insecurity characteristic of Santob's outlook.

The *Moral Proverbs*, to speak more plainly, rests on the shaky foundation of King Pedro's power. Although Santob so often urges adventurous forays against the enemy, he appears to be addressing some at court who would advocate greater forbearance (*cordura*; ll. 355). The very lack of unanimity shows uncertainty about Pedro's strength. However, Santob himself is bound by his own doctrine to mistrust his assessment of events: "For never can there be A world without surprises./ It often will reverse Events and enterprises" (ll. 1269-70). More concretely, and perhaps with a gloomy note of prophecy, Santob writes, "Always in a trice, Should fortune's wheel so choose,/ A crown becomes the equal Of weary, well-worn shoes" (ll. 1275-6). Still, the *Moral Proverbs* closes with wishful thinking. The poet lauds power exercised with moderation and urges King Pedro to take heed. To this new monarch he applies a moving epithet: he calls him "guardian of this flock" (l. 1458), in other words, defender of Castilian Jewry. In the penultimate strophe, Santob implores the king to press all his retainers into his own service for preventive war-making against the forces of Henry of Trastamara. In the last strophe, as if to link his own fate to that of all Jews of Castile, Santob pleads for Pedro's favor as promised by his late father. Whether Pedro kept this promise is unknown. It is known that the Jews supported the king's campaign against his half-brother. But the abyss opened up in 1369 and swallowed Pedro and his Jewish partisans. According to legend, Pedro perished in singular combat with Henry, from whom in a direct line Queen Isabella was to descend, the Catholic Monarch who in 1492 expelled the Jews from Spain. What remains of those turbulent times of civil strife? Ironically, two imperishable monuments of Jewish culture. One, still visible in the city of Toledo, near the presumed house of El Greco, is the magnificent Synagogue of the *Tránsito*, built by Pedro's once-powerful treasurer, Don Simuel ha-Levi (d. 1360). The other, of course, is the *Moral Proverbs*, constructed strophe by strophe by a rabbinical architect who, as we have shown, ventured a self-conscious smile while the rest of his world seemed on the brink of crumbling.

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#### NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all historical data stem from Klausner, "The Historic and Social Milieu of Santob's *Proverbios morales*," *Hispania*, 48 (Dec. 1965), 783-9. For a contemporary fictional reworking of the events of King Pedro's reign, see Francisco Ayala's short story "El abrazo," in *Los usurpadores* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1949), 179-223.

2. In *The Structure of Spanish History*, tr. Edmund L. King (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 551, Castro calls Santob's work "the first instance of authentic lyric expression in Castilian"; and he explains that "Don Santob presents us with a poetic

reality as a primary thing expressing an objectified feeling independent of any kind of human event." Here we employ Santob de Carrión, *Proverbios morales* ed. I, González Llubera (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947). Henceforth references from this edition appear parenthesized with number of line in our text.

3. Klauser, "Reflections on Santob de Carrión, *Hispania*, 46 (May 1963), 305.

4. Cf. the Invocation with which Juan Ruiz, Archpriest of Hita, begins his *Book of Good Love*, written in 1343: "Under the thorn lies the rose, a noble flower;/ Under an ugly letter lies knowledge of a great teacher;/ As under a foul cape lies a good drinker./ Hence under a bad cassock lies *Good Love*." Our translation of *Libro de Buen Amor*, 8th ed. (Madrid: Espasa-calpe, 1960), I,16, strophe 18.

5. On the controversy between Santob's learned contemporaries and coreligionists concerning the study of science: Klausner, "The Historic and Social Milieu of Santob's *Proverbios morales*," pp. 783-4.

6. On humility as a Talmudic dictate: Guzmán Alvarez, "Introducción" to *Proverbios morales* by Sem Tob de Carrión (Salamanca: Anaya, 1970), p. 15. Alvarez takes issue with Américo Castro's contention that Santob, as a member of the "chosen people," feels anguish at being scorned as lowly by Old Christians. Our own reading of Santob reveals in him a sense of insecurity vis-a-vis nobles of the other faith, but also a conventional, literary self-confidence in which he masks his insecurity. This is not to say that such self-confidence is not genuinely felt to a degree; rather it is elaborated as an expedient to carry him through a difficult time. At the same time, such exuberance is not incompatible with the Talmudic humility mentioned by Alvarez. With him and with Castro we are inclined to see in Santob a complex individual, but we differ with both critics in defining the components of this complexity. Furthermore, our definition seems to make sense in view of all the contents of the rabbi's poem, not merely in view of isolated parts which Alvarez and Castro have chosen to analyze.

