

Borges, Averroes, Aristotle: The Poetics of Poetics

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Abstract: Borges's appropriations of literary theory are mischievous, undermining the grand, universalizing claims of theory. His strategies are clearly exemplified in "La busca de Averroes," which shows not only Averroes's difficulties in explicating Aristotle's *Poetics* but also Borges's own difficulties in depicting Averroes in his otherness in twelfth-century Islamic Spain. Ultimately the story is a parable of the impossibility of theory, a swerve from the general to the particular.

Key Words: Borges (Jorge Luis), Averroes, "Busca de Averroes," Aristotle, poetics, literary theory, Orientalism

La palabra *corsarias* corre el albur de despertar un recuerdo vagamente incómodo: el de una descolorida zarzuela, con sus teorías de evidentes mucamas, que hacían de piratas coreográficas en mares de notable cartón.

Borges, *Obras completas* (306)¹

As Borges reminds us in the opening sentence of "La viuda Ching, pirata" (in *Historia universal de la infamia*, 1935), *theory* in Greek meant "festival" or "procession." Dario uses the word "teoría" in the same unusual sense in "El reino interior" (1896): "Por el lado derecho del camino adelante, / el paso leve, una adorable teoría / virginal. Siete blancas doncellas, semejantes / a siete blancas rosas de gracia y de armonía / que el alba constelara de perlas y diamantes" (67). Borges's use of the word is considerably more transgressive than Dario's in that he shoves the word from a "high" cultural context to a "low" one. By carnivalizing this solemn philosophical word, by turning the Greek word from religious procession to can-can, Borges, as is often his wont, deflates the notion of high seriousness or pure abstraction, here with a grotesque, even a pathetic image: the "evidentes mucamas" are domestic servants who aspire to be vaudeville dancers but do not quite succeed. But if "La viuda Ching, pirata" ends up as a vindication of the life of a female pirate, moving from the ridiculous to the sublime, so Borges is—at least for our time—one of the world authors most

frequented by "theory," high and low, pure and applied. In what follows I will be mostly concerned with the presence of the founding text of literary theory, Aristotle's *Poetics*, in the 1947 story "La busca de Averroes," hoping to suggest new ways to read the relation between "Borges" and "theory."

From Genette and Foucault to de Man and Bloom, from Pierre Macherey to John Frow, Borges is invoked at any number of key moments in the theoretical discussions of the last thirty years. Borges has been subjected to all types of readings: structuralist, Bakhtinian, Derridean, Marxist, Lacanian, feminist and queer, philosophical, scientific, new historicist and cultural studies, postcolonial, religious, etc. etc. In fact, the MLA bibliography lists "applications of the theories of" the following to Borges: Barthes, Lacan, Derrida, Spitzer, Girard, Bakhtin, Peirce, Eco, Robbe-Grillet, Genette, Amado Alonso, Jung, de Man, Eliade, Mario Valdés, Ricoeur, Berkeley, Carlyle, Propp, Greimas, Benjamin, Said, Cassirer, Steiner, and others, as well as the applications of such other kinds of theory as chaos theory, game theory, semiotics, quantum theory, translation theory and so forth. It seems from this astonishing cata-

logue that we are only lacking a Buddhist-Leninist reading of *El libro de arena* with applications of the theories of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Joseph Campbell, but no doubt someone, somewhere is writing a dissertation or an article along those lines.

Borges's writings show his great familiarity with literary criticism: John Livingston Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu*, Dante criticism, Old Norse and Old English criticism, Valéry, Eliot, Stuart Gilbert's book on *Ulysses* (praised as being worth reading instead of the Joyce novel itself [232]), criticism of gauchesque poetry, etc. He seems less interested in literary theory per se. There are two key references to Aristotle's *Poetics*—in "La busca de Averroes" and in "El pudor de la historia" (583, 754), the latter to remark that Aeschylus increased the number of actors from one to two—and a few scattered references to Croce, Coleridge, Arnold, Eliot, and the James/Stevenson debates on narrative theory. Borges makes no direct reference to the Russian formalists, Burke, the New Critics, even to Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, or—perhaps because of blindness, perhaps from disinterest—to more recent schools of theory.

But the theory/criticism distinction is undermined in Borges because "theoretical" arguments may be embedded in fictional plots, in critical essays, even in the short prose pieces of *El hacedor*. For instance, the central theoretical insight in "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote"—that a text comes to be when read and rewritten—first appears in an essay, "La fruición literaria," in *El idioma de los argentinos* (1928), and predates the Konstanz school of the "aesthetics of reception" and Stanley Fish's "reader response theory" by some forty years. In "La fruición literaria," Borges proposes a conundrum: that the meaning of a text varies greatly depending on its attribution. Working with a phrase "El incendio, con feroces mandíbula[s], devora el campo," he inquires what this would mean if written by a fire survivor, by a Chinese poet, by an avant garde poet (of the kind he had been himself at the beginning of the same de-

cade), only to reveal at the end that the phrase is by Aeschylus, and as such is associated with remote antiquity and its severe beauty (*El idioma de los argentinos* 90–91). This stunt of interpretation is greatly extended in "Pierre Menard," apropos of Menard's rewriting, under the influence of William James, of the phrase from Cervantes "La verdad, cuya madre es la historia, émula del tiempo, depósito de las acciones, testigo de lo pasado, ejemplo y aviso de lo presente, advertencia de lo por venir" (449).

It is not easy to accommodate Borges's disparate ideas into a system or coherent theory, as Shumway and Sant have pointed out. Some have argued, for instance, that *Otras inquisiciones* advocates a literary history without authors' names, but the essays on Wilde and Valéry undercut this idea by arguing that these authors can be valued for their sincerity (a word seldom associated with Wilde) or personality (not viewed as a virtue by Valéry). Borges uses paradox throughout his critical writings as a way of resisting generalizations; this can be seen in "Pierre Menard" itself. Carla Cordua's insight into Borges's uses of metaphysics is germane here: Borges does not "do" philosophy—or theory—but does not just refer to it either. By "doing" theory differently—by resisting the impulse to generalize, by contradicting himself from one text to another, by thinking through paradox in much of his work—Borges proves exemplary as a critic attentive to the particulars of the text he comments, and can be used productively at almost every turn of contemporary theoretical work, although one would have to say that he is *in* but not *of* that textual universe. Cordua notes:

Los frutos de la teoría [de la metafísica] son tratados por Borges, antes que nada, como productos de la fantasía y a los cultivadores históricos de la filosofía los tiene por amables ilusos encandilados por la quimera de la verdad. Para Borges la teoría fue siempre una actividad de otros que trae al mundo ciertos objetos en extremo raros y sugerentes. Esta perspectiva, completamente inusual, si lo pensamos bien, puede ser llamada, creo, una interpretación estética de la filosofía. (630)

If Borges chooses (in "La viuda Ching" and elsewhere) to return to the Greek—out of an interest in etymology, calling in his essay "El idioma infinito" for a return to the "primordial meaning" of a word (*El tamaño de mi esperanza* 41)²—so his story "La busca de Averroes" is shaped by another kind of desire for return: a return to the very origins of literary theory, Aristotle's *Poetics*.³ Borges's story opens with an epigraph from Renan's *Averroes et l'averroïsme* and ends with an evocation of the same author, thus suggesting that Renan is Borges's primary or perhaps only source. Borges's *Averroes*, or *ibn Rushd*, as he is known in Arabic, is disturbed by a "philological" doubt related to his commentary on the *Poetics* at the moment he is penning the eleventh chapter of his *Tahafut Al-Tahafut (Incoherence of the Incoherence)*, his attack on al-Ghazali's *Tahafut Al-Filasifa (Incoherence of the Philosophers)*, in its turn an attack on philosophy as an illegitimate branch of theology. (It should be noted that Averroes was exiled near the end of his life and some of his books burnt in a similar battle between theology and philosophy; Borges does not say so, but the stakes in this dispute were high.) Averroes's "philological" doubt, that serves to interrupt his philosophy for an afternoon and an evening, has to do with two unknown words, "tragedy" and "comedy." Now, any reader of Aristotle's *Poetics* will concur that an inability to decipher these words will gravely impede an understanding of Aristotle's text, and Averroes shares that preoccupation: "Esas dos palabras arcanas pululaban en el texto de la Poética; imposible eludirlas" (583).

Much of the Borges story is a discussion with Abulcásim al-Asharí (the name is based on that of one of Averroes's biographers) about whether it is better to show or to tell. Al-Asharí tells of his experience of having attended a theater in China—"Imaginemos que alguien muestra una historia en vez de referirla" (585)—and because he does not tell of the experience in a way that is clearly understandable (even to Averroes, who is hungry for information about precisely this art, though he may not

know it), the consensus among his listeners is that it is unnecessary to use numerous people to tell a story when one would suffice. The issue arises in the *Poetics*, in the passage cited by Borges in "El pudor de la historia," when Aristotle recalls that Aeschylus increased the number of actors from one to two (Janko 6); Borges comments on this passage in that essay at some length, finally noting:

...nunca sabremos si [Esquilo] presintió, siquiera de un modo imperfecto, lo significativo de aquel pasaje del uno al dos, de la unidad a la pluralidad y así a lo infinito. Con el segundo actor entraron el diálogo y las indefinidas posibilidades de la reacción de unos caracteres sobre otros. (754–55)

The same issue—showing vs. telling—, now wholly transposed into the art of narrative, preoccupied Henry James and his followers, notably Percy Lubbock; in the story, Farach, the scholar of the *Koran*, says of the Chinese theater that has been described by his guest Albucásim: "En tal caso ... no se requerían veinte personas. Un solo hablante puede referir cualquier cosa, por complejo que sea" (586). (John Sturrock rightly calls attention to the unusual word "hablista" instead of "hablante" or "narrador" [284].)

But the central point of the story is, as the narrator states at the end, "el proceso de una derrota[,] ... el caso de un hombre que se propone un fin que no está vedado a los otros, pero sí a él" (587–88). For the narrator, and presumably for the reader, a reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* by someone without knowledge and experience of the theater is unthinkable, but such is the case of Averroes in twelfth-century Al-Andalus. Ironically, of course, the narrator calls attention to boys in the street pretending to be muezzin and congregation (playing, that is, at the theater), and the conversation at Farach's house, as we have seen, turns on Abulcásim's account of a visit to a theater in China.⁴ A reading of the *Poetics* by someone who thinks that tragedy is panegyric or eulogy and comedy is satire seems ludicrous, as Renan remarks in his *Averroes et l'averroïsme* (in the same passage from

which Borges took the epigraph to the story, "S'imaginant que la tragédie n'est autre chose que l'art de louer"): "Cette paraphrase accuse ... l'ignorance la plus complète de la littérature grecque" (He imagines that tragedy is nothing if not the art of praising. This paraphrase reveals ... the most complete ignorance of Greek literature. 48).⁵

Let me confess now to having read Averroes's *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics*, translated into English in 1986 by Charles E. Butterworth.⁶ This work, as Butterworth notes, is almost unknown in the Arabic-speaking world, having only been published in the last 125 years and in scholarly editions that have apparently circulated little; the two Arabic manuscripts are preserved in libraries in Florence and Leiden. Renan knew the work through translations of translations of the original, remarking at one point that the works of Averroes that were available to him were Latin translations of Hebrew translations of a commentary made upon Arabic translations of Syriac translations of Greek originals (52); Averroes's inability to read Aristotle directly is more than compensated by his readers' inability (from Thomas Aquinas to Borges) to read him directly. If it were not for Butterworth's notes, Averroes's quotations from and reflections on Arabic poetry and poetics would be nearly incomprehensible for the Western non-Arabist reader (as they were for one of his medieval translators, Hermann Alemann⁷), just as Averroes could not make much sense of Aristotle's references to Greek poetry. But this is not entirely the point. Averroes acknowledges at the outset that Aristotle comments on aspects of Greek poetry that do not have ready analogies in Arabic poetry, or in the poetry of "most or all nations," to use his frequent phrase; he sets as his task the adaptation of Aristotle's argument to Arabic poetry, a dimension Stavans does not explore in this article on the story. Thus, he argues through his commentary that Aristotle did not set out the rules for all poetry and that he will not do so either; the *Poetics* and the

Middle Commentary are particular rather than general in scope.

As Averroes argues in his *Tahafut Al-Tahafut* [or *Incoherence of the Incoherence*]:

The theory of the philosophers that universals exist only in the mind, not in the external world, only means that the universals exist actually only in the mind, and not in the external world, not that they do not exist at all in the external world, for the meaning is that they exist potentially, not actually in the external world; indeed, if they did not exist at all in the outside world they would be false. (65)

So here with the poetics. Borges's summary of the eleventh chapter of *Tahafut* is exact in the story: "se mantiene, contra el asceta persa Ghazali, autor del *Tahafut-ul-falasifa* (Destrucción de filósofos), que la divinidad sólo conoce las leyes generales del universo, lo concerniente a las especies, no al individuo" (582).⁸ Averroes himself writes at the end of the chapter in question:

And concerning both universals and individuals it is true of Him that He knows them and does not know them. This is the conclusion to which the principles of the ancient philosophers led; but those who make a distinction, and say that God knows universals but does not know particulars, have not fully grasped their theory, and this is not a consequence of their principles. For all human sciences are passivities and impressions from the existents, and the existents operate on them. But the knowledge of the Creator operates on existents, and the existents receive the activities of His knowledge. (269)

Knowing and not knowing: in this paradox resides one of Averroes's fundamental insights.

In one of his essays on Dante, Borges writes: "La precisión que acabo de indicar no es un artificio retórico; es afirmación de la probidad, de la plenitud, con que cada incidente del poema ha sido imaginado" (*Nueve ensayos dantescos* 88). In the case of Borges's Averroes, what is at stake in arguing for "precisión" is not the minimal references to the local color of Moslem Spain—the fountain, the harem, and so forth—but the intellectual rigor with which Averroes's mental world has been recreated: the right chapter of the *Tahafut* is mentioned, the names of the Arabic translators of Aristotle are correctly cited, the Hellenistic commentator on Aristotle (Alexander of Aphrodisias)

is consulted at the right moment. John Sturrock gets it profoundly wrong when he calls Borges's erudition into question here, doubting the existence of Alexander of Aphrodisias (279) and stating of the Ghazali *Tahafut* and of Averroes's reply: "Whether these are real works of early Arabic thought, or whether Borges has made them up, I do not know. Their existence is, so to speak, immaterial" (280). On the contrary: Borges may not have known how to read Arabic or Hebrew but he made excellent use of the Latin and modern material (not, as the ineffable Mr. Sturrock would have it, "immaterial") available to him.

As already noted, "Pierre Menard," like "La fruición literaria" before it, complicates the matter of literary interpretation by insisting that the meaning of a text depends not only on the conditions of its production (who wrote it, when, and under what circumstances) but also of its reception. In this story the same idea is broached in the discussion of whether a metaphor in a classic Arabic poem (destiny seen as a blind camel) has become a mere cliché; Averroes argues to the contrary that an image penned in the Arabian desert acquires new layers of meaning centuries later in Al-Andalus: "Dos términos tenía la figura y hoy tiene cuatro" (587). The two new terms added to the figure (which initially consisted of "camel" and "destiny") are "Zuhair,"⁹ the Arabic poet who composed the image, and "nuestros pesares," the sufferings and sorrows of Zuhair's Spanish readers, so distant from the Arabian desert. By the same token, Aristotle's text is enriched on being read by Averroes, and Averroes's on being read by Borges, although the "difference" between one and another may be as invisible as that between Menard's and Cervantes's versions of "la verdad, cuya madre es la historia" (449).

"La busca de Averroes," then, is the story of the founding text of literary theory, as misunderstood—or better still, as reimagined—in a different cultural context. The story is cast as a tragedy in Aristotle's terms: the philosopher's quest is undone by his ignorance, and by his masking of his igno-

rance with a sense of superiority. (One problem with the casting of this story as tragedy is its genre: the short story is a narration, without the independent existence of characters, or their presence on the stage.) For undertaking a translation of the *Poetics* without a sense of what theater is (much less the distinction between tragedy and comedy) is surely an act of hubris.¹⁰ Averroes's failure ("quise narrar el proceso de una derrota" [587]) is mirrored in the narrator's failure, Averroes's disappearance before the mirror signalling the failure of the narrator's imagination.

Van der Bergh states in his introduction to the *Tahafut*: "Averroës was the last great philosopher in Islam in the twelfth century, and is the most scholarly and scrupulous commentator of Aristotle. He is far better known in Europe than in the Orient [sic], where few of his works are still in existence and where he had no influence, he being the last great philosopher of his culture" (xii). Yet he is knowable here only through his otherness. As Floyd Merrell has argued in his brief discussion of the story:

The concepts of tragedy and comedy exist within the cultural milieu of the West, and hence the pair is for Borges adequately intelligible, but not for Averroes. Borges, on the other hand, endeavors to construct a narrative that lies within Averroes's Islamic form of life, a task equally as impossible as that of Averroes. The self-reflective injunction both men give themselves is tantamount to the paradoxical Socratic knowledge paradox [sic], which pragmatically puts one in an untenable situation, for to know *that* one knows, one must already know, and if one already knows, then one cannot conscientiously set out to obey the injunction. Yet, in a manner of speaking, both tasks *are* possible, for Borges *does* complete his narrative, however inadequate he may claim it to be, and Averroes *did* somehow solve his problem, for his answer vaguely corresponds to Aristotle's *Poetics*. . . . In this manner, the paradox has in a sense been resolved, yet it has not been truly resolved, since both Averroes and the narrator apparently merely muddled their way through to an answer; there is no way of their knowing absolutely how they stumbled upon it or whether or not it was correct. (75–76)

Knowing and not knowing again: in Merrell's formulation, an insight into the particular, gained by "mere muddling through," by "vague correspondences," is

not sufficient knowledge of the whole, but it is knowledge of some sort.

Corbin notes that Averroes (like Dante after him, in the letter to Can Grande discussed by Borges and so many others) argues for the coexistence of exoteric (*zahir*) meanings and one or more esoteric (*batin*) meanings (245); the next story in *El Aleph* is precisely "El Zahir." The subtle discussion of metaphor in Averroes's *Middle Commentary* (fuller than the corresponding discussion in Aristotle) suggests the importance for him of suggestion and connotation, a refusal of hermeneutic closure, as does the succession of commentaries that he wrote to Aristotle, from the short initial ones to the later "middle" and "great" commentaries (see Fakhry 273 and Peters 95 on the various kinds of commentaries). He might have approved Borges's definition of esthetics (and beauty, and poetics): "esta inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es, quizá, el hecho estético" (635). In placing a resistance to closure and to system at the end of "La muralla y los libros," the first essay of *Otras inquisiciones*, his primary book of essays, Borges mocks (in advance) the folly of those who would try to box him in to one or another theoretical approach, and by stressing the "imminence" of an (endlessly postponed) revelation, he leaves open the possibility of different, and endlessly renewable, readings. He makes the same point in the final essay of (later editions of) *Otras inquisiciones*, "Sobre los clásicos." Revelation itself is somewhat suspect, as faith requires closure; the liminal is the space of poetics.¹¹

■ NOTES

¹Unless otherwise noted all quotations from Borges are from the 1974 edition of the so-called *Obras completas*.

²Cf. "Sobre los clásicos": "Escasas disciplinas habrá de mayor interés que la etimología; ello se debe a las imprevisibles transformaciones del sentido primitivo de las palabras, a lo largo del tiempo. Dadas tales transformaciones, que pueden lindar con lo paradójico, de nada o de muy poco nos servirá para la aclaración de un concepto el origen de una palabra" (772).

³Nicolás Álvarez discusses the presence of Aristotle and Plato in Borges, though without discuss-

ing "La busca de Averroes": he focuses his discussion (less productively, in my view) on "La escritura del dios," a story that is set in post-Conquest Guatemala, as I have argued in *Out of Context* (69–80).

⁴Cf. Aristotle: "what is possible is believable; we do not believe that what has never happened is possible, but things which have happened are obviously possible—they would not have happened, if they were impossible" (Janko trans., 12).

⁵Surprisingly Julia Kushigian does not discuss the "Orientalist" tendencies in this story, which she mentions in passing in her chapter on Borges in *Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition* (24).

⁶Oddly, Ilan Stavans calls the *Middle Commentary* "ahora extraviado" (17), although Butterworth's translation of it was published two years before his article.

⁷See Butterworth's introduction to his translation of the *Middle Commentary* (xii) and Renan (211–12).

⁸Stavans argues that Borges could not have known the *Tahafut* because he could not read Arabic or Hebrew (16), forgetting that Borges was an excellent Latinist and could have read the book in Latin. It is worth remembering that Averroes, as Butterworth and others have remarked, is more widely published in Latin than in Arabic.

⁹On Zohair, see Butterworth's introduction, Averroes, *Middle Commentary* (61).

¹⁰Of course critics who do have knowledge and experience of the theater have had myriad other problems of interpretation of the *Poetics*, e.g. Else, Davis, Janko, and the essays in the Rorty collection.

¹¹I am grateful to Gwen Kirkpatrick for her careful reading and critique of a draft of this article.

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