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Comment écrire la plus simple histoire, alors qu'elle implique une possibilité infinie de variation, alors que sa forme choisie *manquera* toujours des autres formes qui auraient pu l'habiller? . . . en choisissant justement parmi ces formes celle qui, par son déséquilibre, son caractère évidemment artificieux, ses contradictions, préserve de mieux la question.²

Borges relates the story of Averroes's search for the meanings of the words "tragedy" and "comedy" that he has come across first in the *Rhetoric* and then in the *Poetics* whilst writing a commentary on the works of Aristotle. Twice during the story Averroes is presented with the answer to his problem and twice he ignores it. At the end of the night he carefully but confidently adds to his manuscript:

Aristú denomina tragedia a los panegiricos y comedias a las sátiras y anatemas. Admirables tragedias y comedias abundan en las páginas del Corán y en las mohalacas del santuario. (A 103)

Having written these words he glances in a mirror and disappears. At this point the writer breaks into the story to explain that he had wanted to write about a failure and had remembered the case of Averroes. As he wrote the story he felt mocked by his own work, felt that he, trying to imagine Averroes with the help of a handful of European books, was equally as ridiculous as Averroes himself. The title is revealed as ambiguous and ironical: the search for Averroes is equally as futile as Averroes's own search.

Borges is concerned to highlight all the ironies of Averroes's failure. The central irony is clearly that Averroes is twice confronted with the answer to his search and twice ignores it. First he sees children enacting a simple play of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer from the minaret;³ then he is told by Abulcásim, a traveller recently returned from China, of a dramatic production he had seen there, an event Abulcásim describes as "figurando una historia" (A 99). It seems that this irony points to the central theme of the story: the impossibility of Averroes's search given that he has no concept of theatre. This, as the writer says, is what particularly fascinated him: "el caso de un hombre que se propone un fin que no está vedado a los otros, pero sí a él" (A 104). Averroes's epistemology is that of Islamic culture "el ámbito de Islam" (A 104). Islam contains no concept of theatre so Averroes is excluded from understanding Aristotle's text.⁴ Although this exclusion is sympathetically described Averroes must ultimately be punished for his commitment to the Islamic paradigm: he suffers the fate reserved for

the blind in Borges's schematic world: "desapareció bruscamente, como si lo fulminara un fuego sin luz" (A 103).

The central theme of ironic failure is compounded by the narrator's confession that he has fallen into the same trap. Though the reader may be initially disconcerted by the writer's intervention he quickly sees that the writer's presentation of his own predicament can only sharpen the reader's understanding of Averroes's failure. The reciprocal symbolism appears therefore to be an appropriate ending:

Sentí, en la última página, que mi narración era un símbolo del hombre que yo fui, mientras la escribía y que, para redactar esa narración yo tuve que ser aquel hombre y que, para ser aquel hombre, yo tuve que redactar esa narración, y así hasta lo infinito. (A 104)

So the apt self-irony is kept under control. The quiet honesty underlines the theme of failure. The reader retires mildly chastened at the thought of the obstacles that separated Averroes from Aristotle and Borges from Averroes; but confident that he has understood the dimensions of that failure. Borges's confession is above all reassuring: it locates him within his text as traditional hermeneutics demands.⁵

This interpretation offers itself in an innocent gesture characteristic of Borges's fictions. That it will prove insufficient to the detail of the story should not however be surprising given the arduous nature of the hermeneutical activity within the story itself. Borges interprets Averroes through Renan. Renan used a Latin translation of Averroes's Arabic that he himself considered defective. Averroes worked from an Arabic translation of a Syriac translation of Aristotle's Greek.⁶ He wanted to interpret Aristotle's books "como los ulemas interpretan el Alcorán" (A 94). Farach reminds us that the Qur'ān is the uncreated word of God ("irrevocable y eterno" (A 98)), a privileged status free from the randomness of the quotidian, which has, logically but paradoxically, opened it to conflicting interpretations, even beyond the constituent ambiguity of its original Kufic transcription without vowels or diacritical points.⁷ In a text so fraught with hermeneutical entropy it clearly behoves the reader to be suspicious of any suggestion that it offers a *clear* warning about anything, even about the difficulties of comprehension.

One can press further the ironies of this most ironical of stories. Averroes is of course dedicated to his commentary on Aristotle, but significantly the story opens with him writing his *Tahafut-ul-Tahafut*:

en el que se mantiene, contra la 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. (A 93)

He considers this "trabajo fortuito" (A 94): a marginal work, but given a prominent position at the beginning of the story. Averroes fails to realize that his contradiction of Al-Ghazālī on this point is in a sense a contradiction of Aristotle's belief that there are "no plans or theories relevant to the unending variety of individual cases".⁸ Islamic philosophy was more concerned

to reconcile than to differentiate Plato and Aristotle, so Averroes's point is not intrinsically surprising: merely ironical in such an enthusiastic commentator of Aristotle.

Ironically again (in the light of this attempted reconciliation) the very conflict between individual theory and general case, particular and universal, which was one of the main points of difference between the Greeks, pervades the story, haunting Averroes with its ironies. The most important of these builds on the irony already explicated. While Averroes is grappling with a problem that he cannot solve—but which he can at least recognize as a problem—he shows in his defence of “leyes generales” a failure to understand another aspect of Aristotle's thought, that aspect being precisely what he would need to make sense of the failure that, without it, he cannot even recognize as failure. The nominalist argument, not grasped by Averroes, that there are no plans or theories relevant to the unending variety of individual cases, is proved by the individual case of Aristotle himself who escapes the well-meaning interpretation of Averroes. Averroes is prevented by the various distances that separate him from Aristotle from grasping the truth of the argument that would enable him to understand why he is unable to grasp that argument. He is the complete alazon. The irony is impermeable.

At first sight this additional complex of ironies seems to reinforce the central theme: they are ironies about the impossibility and indeed pathos (the narrator calls the case “poético” (*A* 104)) of Averroes's situation; and they do indeed deepen our awareness of Averroes's blindness. Again, the central theme has constituted two authorities, two fixed points: Aristotle (in whose margin Averroes is writing) and Borges, who understands his own failure (whatever the relationship between “him” and Borges)⁹ and offers that understanding to the reader. The second complex of ironies is based on Averroes's inability to understand the aspect of Aristotle's thought that explains the resistance of the individual to the abstract idea. So Aristotle is verified, his authority confirmed, by Averroes's lack of comprehension. But, disconcertingly, the light cast by this irony on the central theme itself—the cultural nature of Averroes's blindness—serves only to reveal a deep contradiction, for Averroes's failure to grasp the significance of the *particular* examples of drama he witnessed and heard an account of, is due to his lack of a concept of theatre; that is to say his lack of a *universal* notion. So this failure, far from reinforcing the inviolacy of Aristotle's text, points to how Aristotle's rejection of Plato's “general idea” is contradicted by Averroes's experience: the particular cannot pre-exist the universal (as Aristotle affirmed) because the “particular” example of drama is unavailable to Averroes's comprehension without the “universal” concept of theatre. Paradoxically, Averroes's argument against Al-Ghazālī is confirmed by his failure to understand the meaning of tragedy. It need hardly be said that Averroes is in no position to appreciate this irony. So the secondary theme, while seeming

in its introduction of the universal/particular argument to be deepening the ironical rift between an all-seeing Aristotle and a purblind Averroes, is in fact revealing (bringing to light) the refutation of Aristotle by Averroes's failure to understand Aristotle—a refutation that would have been latent but unmotivated without the subtext.¹⁰

In other words, in the interstices of the canonical text that the writer interprets at the end of the story is to be found the "trabajo fortuito" (appropriately entitled *The Destruction of the Destruction*) which engenders ironies that, though they can only darken Averroes's blindness, serve to reveal the contradiction latent in the central text, to negate the initial cluster of ironies, to subvert the seemingly privileged status of Aristotle within the text, and to show the reader that the offered interpretation is a knowledge no less partial than that possessed by Averroes himself. That determinedly Islamic mirror which refuses to reflect the face of Averroes, also refuses to let us glimpse Borges there as a comforting and recognizable validator of interpretation: there is no third voice to stabilize the dialogic confrontation. The apparent stability of the two fixed points dissolves into the vertiginous *regressus* of the final paragraph. The question is: whose face does then appear in the mirror?

* * *

Borges's fictions are constructed so that the reader passes through a particular reading experience of which several stages can be identified, culminating in the traditional moment of *peripeteia* which reader shares with hero, although their perceptions are crucially distinct. The experience is constituted by a characteristic movement (often dependent on a second reading) that no simply structural analysis can identify. The stages of this experience can be schematically identified as deception, disclosure (or rejection), and recognition. An interpretation offers itself (or, as in "La busca" is presented directly by the narrator); the reader realizes (often through re-reading) that the interpretation is inadequate; the moment of *peripeteia* reveals the true solution to the reader.¹¹

The moment of recognition (or at least the moment *available* to the reader for recognition) is always one of vertigo: the "recuerdo asombrado y vertiginoso" of "La muerte y la brújula" (*F* 147); the dream within a dream "hasta lo infinito" from which Tzinacán awakens to self-knowledge (*A* 121-122); here the "hasta lo infinito" of the final mirroring—"el vertiginoso *regressus in infinitum*" as Borges has called it.¹² Rejection precedes recognition: just as Tzinacán (that model reader) is led by the infinitely complex black marks on the yellow fur to reject the notion of a divine sentence as puerile or blasphemous, so the reader of "La busca" must be led by the mutually negating ironies to the rejection of the notion of "meaning", more particularly to the banishment of the idea that reading a text is a search

for the author as validator of an interpretation. The reader who enters Borges's labyrinths in search of their creator¹³ finds that, like all good labyrinth-makers, he has flown. There is no extractable core at the heart of the labyrinth.¹⁴

Vertigo is of course the penultimate valley,¹⁵ providing the discomfort in which revelation must be received: "Dis-spent and foul disfigured"¹⁶ or, as Carlos Argentino charmingly puts it: "el decúbito dorsal es indispensable" (*A* 167). The revelation, to justify the theological language, comes through light. Tzinacán is awoken from the dreams within dreams by a circle of light from above (*A* 121); Lönnrot sees the moon through the windows of the mirador (*F* 147); the light reflected from the metal mirror fulminates Averroes (*A* 103).

The moment is available for recognition. Reading is not concerned with location of meaning—the story has refused that recuperation; it is rather a process in which the protagonist is the reader himself. The search for and denial of meaning—the reader's quest—is itself the import or tenor of the story: the story exists to move the reader through the stages of deception and disclosure which alone can prevent him seeking to locate a meaning "within" the words, attempting to recognize the operation of a consciousness. The recognition that this is so, that *he* is the protagonist of the story, that the text has read him, that he has become fictitious,¹⁷ and the realization that this recognition is the necessary final step in that process, frees the reader, allows him to move outside the labyrinth of the text: vertigo is followed by annihilation.¹⁸ The reading can only end when the reader recognizes his own face in the mirror.¹⁹

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NOTES

¹ Quotations from and references to *Ficciones* and *El Aleph* are followed parenthetically in the text by *F* and *A* and page numbers. Editions referred to are: *Ficciones* (Emecé: Buenos Aires, 1966) and *El Aleph* (Alianza Emecé: Madrid, 1971). At various points in this article I am indebted to Mary Kinzie's lucid "Recursive prose", *Tri-Quarterly* XXV (1972), 11-51. See also E. M. Anglada, "Borges y el engañoso espejo oriental", *La Torre* LXI (1968), 111-138.

² P. Macherey, *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire* (Paris, 1971), p. 281.

³ The irony here is double. One of the reasons that the paradigm of Islamic culture does not contain a concept of theatre is that for Islam it is anathema to duplicate the world created by God: the children are acting (i.e. duplicating) precisely the commandment that forbids duplication: "there is no god but God".

⁴ That it is a question of Averroes's paradigm forbidding him the knowledge that he seeks and not his ignorance or prejudice is established by the sympathetic picture Borges draws of Averroes: the creativity of his reasoning within the context of orthodoxy is contrasted to Farach's rigidity, and Borges attributes to Averroes one of his favourite arguments about poetic images: see Kinzie, 23-25.

⁵ See for example E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, 1967).

⁶ See E. Spivakovsky, "In Search of Arabic Influences on Borges", *Hispania*, LI (1968), 230-231.

⁷ On the logic of polyvalence in non-random ("sacred") texts, see I. Rabinowitz, "Word and Literature in Ancient Israel", *New Literary History* IV (1972), 119-140. For Borges's defence of the logic (as applied by the Cabalists to the Bible) see *Discusión* (Buenos Aires, 1972), pp. 55-60.

⁸ Mary Kinzie's words, 15. She acutely contrasts Averroes's idealism with the extreme nominalism of Funes: "on the other precipice, but facing the same abyss" (14).

⁹ In Wayne Booth's terms this would be a distinction between narrator and second self (*The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1961), p. 71). This relationship is especially complex in Borges: see Gordon Brotherston, "Introduction" to J. L. Borges, *Ficciones*, ed. G. Brotherston and P. Hulme (London, 1976), pp. 16-27.

¹⁰ It would clearly be an error to see Borges grappling with a philosophical problem here: it would be as irrelevant to point out that Aristotle's *universales in re* make impossible any simple Plato-Aristotle opposition as it would be to take issue with the historical accuracy of the story. As Borges is well aware, there is no meaningful contradiction between forms and things (see B. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London, 1965), p. 177): the opposition in the story has a purely aesthetic function.

¹¹ The movement is amusingly prefigured in the description of Herbert Quain's novel *The god of the labyrinth* (F 76-77). The pattern is shown at its clearest in Borges's early reworking of a story from Don Juan Manuel's *Conde Lucanor*: "El brujo postergado" (*Historia universal de la infamia* (Buenos Aires, 1967), pp. 131-135) which can be considered as an allegory (and of course enactment) of the relationship between author and reader. See Jean Ricardou's brief but brilliant analysis: *Problèmes du nouveau roman* (Paris, 1967), pp. 31-32.

¹² *Discusión*, p. 135.

¹³ As a locatable consciousness: see above, note 5.

¹⁴ For a perceptive application of the Daedalus imagery see N. Rosa, "Borges o la ficción laberíntica", in J. Lafforgue, ed., *Nueva novela latinoamericana II: La narrativa argentina actual* (Buenos Aires, 1972), 140-173. For other examples of self-negating interpretations see Frances Weber's fine analyses: "Borges's Stories: Fiction and Philosophy", *Hispanic Review*, XXXVI (1968), 124-141.

¹⁵ In Farid al-Din 'Attār's poem, *Mantiq al-Tayr*, translated by Edward Fitzgerald as *Bird-Parliament* (in *Fitzgerald: Selected Works* (London, 1962)). Cf. *Ficciones*, p. 42.

¹⁶ Fitzgerald, p. 316.

¹⁷ A fate reserved for readers of at least partially magic books: *Otras inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires, 1970), p. 69. For Borges's continuity with the theory and practice of a distinguished predecessor see my "Macedonio Fernández's 'técnica del mareo': the analysis of a literary device", *Ibero-Amerikanisches Archiv* III (1977), 351-364.

¹⁸ The name of the final valley crossed by the birds in the *Mantiq al-Tayr*.

¹⁹ "Once more they ventured from the Dust to raise / Their Eyes—up to the Throne—into the Blaze, / And in the Centre of the Glory there / Beheld the Figure of—*Themselves*—as 'twere / Transfigured—looking to Themselves, beheld / The Figure on the Throne enmiracled, Until their Eyes themselves and *That* between/Did hesitate which Seer was, which seen;" (Fitzgerald, p. 317).