

*S'imaginant que la tragédie n'est autre chose que l'art de louer....*

Ernest Renan, *Averroës*, 48 (1861)

Abu-al Walíd Muhammad ibn-Ahmad ibn-Rushd (it would take that long name, passing through „Benraist“ and „Aveniris“ and even „Aben Rassad“ and „Filius Rosadis,“ a hundred years to become „Averroës“) was at work on the eleventh chapter of his work *Taháfut al-Taháfut* („Destruction of the Destruction“), which maintains, contrary to the Persian ascetic al-Ghazzáli, author of the *Taháfut al-Falásifah* („Destruction of Philosophers“), that the deity knows only the general laws of the universe, those that apply not to the individual but to the species. He wrote with slow assurance, from right to left; the shaping of syllogisms and linking together of vast paragraphs did not keep him from feeling, like a sense of wonderful well-being, the cool, deep house around him. In the depths of the siesta, loving turtledoves purred throatily, one to another; from some invisible courtyard came the murmur of a fountain; something in the flesh of Averroës, whose ancestors had come from the deserts of Arabia, was grateful for the steadfast presence of the water. Below lay the gardens of flowers and of foodstuffs; below that ran the bustling Guadalquivir; beyond the river spread the beloved city of Córdoba, as bright as Baghdad or Cairo, like a complex and delicate instrument; and, encircling Córdoba (this, Averroës could feel too), extending to the very frontier, stretched the land of Spain, where there were not a great many things, yet where each thing seemed to exist materially and eternally.

His quill ran across the page, the arguments, irrefutable, knitted together, and yet a small worry clouded Averroës' happiness. Not the sort of worry brought on by the *Taháfut*, which was a fortuitous enterprise, but rather a philological problem connected with the monumental work that would justify him to all people – his commentary on Aristotle. That Greek sage, the fountainhead of all philosophy, had been sent down to men to teach them all things that can be known; interpreting Aristotle's works, in the same way the *ulemas* interpret the Qur'an, was the hard task that Averroës had set himself. History will record few things lovelier and more moving than this Arab physician's devotion to the thoughts of a man separated from him by a gulf of fourteen centuries. To the intrinsic difficulties of the enterprise we might add that Averroës, who knew neither Syriac nor Greek, was working from a translation of a translation. The night before, two doubtful words had halted him at the very portals of the *Poetics*. Those words were „tragedy“ and „comedy.“ He had come across them years earlier, in the third book of the *Rhetoric*; no one in all of Islam could hazard a guess as to their meaning. He had pored through the pages of Alexander of Aphrodisias, compared the translations of the Nestorian Hunayn ibn-Ishaq and Abu-Bashar Mata – and he had found nothing. Yet the two arcane words were everywhere in the text of the *Poetics* – it was impossible to avoid them.

Averroës laid down his quill. He told himself (without conviction) that what we seek

is often near at hand, put away the manuscript of the *Tahafut*, and went to the shelf on which the many volumes of blind ibn-Sina's *Moqqam*, copied by Persian copyists, stood neatly aligned. Of course he had already consulted them, but he was tempted by the idle pleasure of turning their pages. He was distracted from that scholarly distraction by a kind of song. He looked out through the bars of the balcony; there below, in the narrow earthen courtyard, half-naked children were at play. One of them, standing on the shoulders of another, was clearly playing at being a muezzin; his eyes tightly closed, he was chanting the muezzin's monotonous cry, *There is no God but Allah*. The boy standing motionless and holding him on his shoulders was the turret from which he sang; another, kneeling, bowing low in the dirt, was the congregation of the faithful. The game did not last long – they all wanted to be the muezzin, no one wanted to be the worshippers or the minaret. Averroës listened to them arguing in the „vulgar“ dialect (that is, the incipient Spanish) of the Muslim masses of the Peninsula. He opened Khalil's *Kitab al-'Ayn* and thought proudly that in all of Córdoba (perhaps in all of Al-Andalus) there was no other copy of the perfect work – only this one, sent him by Emir Ya'qub al-Mansur from Tangier. The name of that port reminded him that the traveler abu-al-Hasan al-Ash'ari, who had returned from Morocco, was to dine with him that evening at the home of the Qur'anist Faraj. Abu-al-Hasan claimed to have reached the kingdoms of the Sin Empire (China); with that peculiar logic born of hatred, his detractors swore that he had never set foot in China and that he had blasphemed Allah in the temples of that land. The gathering would inevitably last for hours; Averroës hurriedly went back to his work on the *Tahafut*. He worked until dusk.

At Faraj's house, the conversation moved from the incomparable virtues of the governor to those of his brother the emir; then, out in the garden, the talk was of roses. Abu-al-Hasan (having never seen them) said there were no roses like those which bedeck the villas of Andalusia. Faraj was not to be suborned by flattery; he observed that the learned ibn-Qutaybah had described a superb variety of *perpetual* rose which grows in the gardens of Hindustan and whose petals, of a deep crimson red, exhibit characters reading *There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet*. He added that abu-al-Hasan must surely be acquainted with those roses. Abu-al-Hasan looked at him in alarm. If he said yes, he would be judged by all, quite rightly, to be the most pliable and serviceable of impostors; if he said no, he would be judged an infidel. He opted to breathe that Allah held the keys that unlock hidden things, and that there was no green or wilted thing on earth that was not recorded in His Book. Those words belong to one of the first suras of the Qur'an; they were received with a reverential murmur. Puffed up by that victory of dialectics, abu-al-Hasan was about to declare that Allah is perfect in His works, and inscrutable. But Averroës, prefiguring the distant arguments of a still-problematic Hume, interrupted.

„I find it less difficult to accept an error in the learned ibn-Qutaybah, or in the copyists,“ he said, „than to accept that the earth brings forth roses with the profession of faith.“

„Precisely. Great words and true,“ said abu-al-Hasan.

„Some traveler, I recall,“ mused the poet Abd-al-Malik, „speaks of a tree whose branches put forth green birds. I am pained less by believing in that tree than in roses adorned with letters.“

„The birds' color,“ said Averroës, „does seem to make that wonder easier to bear. In addition, both birds and the fruit of trees belong to the natural world, while writing is an art. To move from leaves to birds is easier than to move from roses to letters.“

Another guest indignantly denied that writing was an art, since the original Book of the Qur'an – *the mother of the Book* – predates the Creation, and resides in heaven. Another spoke of Al-Jahiz of Basra, who had stated that the Qur'an is a substance that can take the form of man or animal—an opinion which appears to agree with that of the people who attribute to the Qur'an two faces. Faraj discoursed long on orthodox doctrine. The Qur'an, he said, is one of the attributes of Allah, even as His Mercy is; it may be copied in a book, pronounced with the tongue, or remembered in the heart, but while language and signs and writing are the work of men, the Qur'an itself is irrevocable and eternal. Averroës, who had written his commentary on the *Republic*, might have said that the mother of the Book is similar, in a way, to the Platonic Idea, but he could see that theology was one subject utterly beyond the grasp of abu-al Hasan.

Others, who had come to the same realization, urged abu-al-Hasan to tell a tale of wonder. Then, like now, the world was horrible; daring men might wander through it, but so might wretches, those who fall down in the dust before all things. Abu-al-Hasan's memory was a mirror of secret acts of cowardice. What story could he tell? Besides, the guests demanded marvels, while the marvelous was perhaps incommunicable: the moon of Bengal is not the same as the moon of Yemen, but it deigns to be described with the same words. Abu-al-Hasan pondered; then, he spoke:

„He who wanders through climes and cities,“ his unctuous voice began, „sees many things worthy of belief. This, for instance, which I have told but once before, to the king of the Turks. It took place in Sin-I Kalal (Canton), where the River of the Water of Life spills into the sea.“

Faraj asked whether the city lay many leagues from that wall erected by Iskandar dhu-al-Quarnayn (Alexander of Macedonia) to halt the advance of Gog and Magog.

„There are vast deserts between them,“ abu-al-Hasan said, with inadvertent haughtiness. „Forty days must a *kafila* (caravan) travel before catching sight of its towers, and another forty, men say, before the *kafila* stands before them. In Sin-I Kalal I know of no man who has seen it or seen the man who has seen it.“

For one moment the fear of the grossly infinite, of mere space, mere matter, laid its hand on Averroës. He looked at the symmetrical garden; he realized that he was old, useless, unreal. Then abu-al-Hasan spoke again:

„One evening, the Muslim merchants of Sin-I Kalal conducted me to a house of painted wood in which many persons lived. It is not possible to describe that house, which was more like a single room, with rows of cabinet-like contrivances, or balconies, one atop another. In these niches there were people eating and drinking; there were people sitting on the floor as well, and also on a raised terrace. The people on this terrace were playing the tambour and the lute— all, that is, save some fifteen or twenty who wore crimson masks and prayed and sang and conversed among themselves. These masked ones suffered imprisonment, but no one could see the jail; they rode upon horses, but the horse was not to be seen; they waged battle, but the swords were of bamboo; they died, and then they walked

again.“

„The acts of madmen,“ said Faraj, „are beyond that which a sane man can envision.“

„They were not madmen,“ abu-al-Hasan had to explain. „They were, a merchant told me, presenting a story.“

No one understood, no one seemed to want to understand. Abu-al-Hasan, in some confusion, swerved from the tale he had been telling them into inept explanation. Aiding himself with his hands, he said:

„Let us imagine that someone *shows* a story instead of telling it – the story of the seven sleepers of Ephesus, say. We see them retire into the cavern, we see them pray and sleep, we see them sleep with their eyes open, we see them grow while they are asleep, we see them awoken after three hundred nine years, we see them hand the merchant and ancient coin, we see them awoken in paradise, we see them awoken with the dog. It was something like that that the persons on the terrace showed us that evening.“

„Did these persons speak?“ asked Faraj.

„Of course they did,“ said abu-al-Hasan, now become the apologist for a performance that he only barely recalled and that had irritated him considerably at the time. „They spoke and sang and gave long boring speeches!“

„In that case,“ said Faraj, „there was no need for *twenty* persons. A single speaker could *tell* anything, no matter how complex it might be.“

To that verdict, they all gave their nod. They extolled the virtues of Arabic – the language used by Allah, they recalled, when He instructs the angels – and then the poetry of the Arabs. After according that poetry its due praise, abu-al-Hasan dismissed those other poets who, writing in Córdoba or Damascus, clung to pastoral images and Bedouin vocabulary – outmoded, he called them. He said it was absurd for a man whose eyes beheld the wide Guadalquivir to compose odes upon the water of a well. It was time, he argued, that the old metaphors be renewed; back when Zuhayr compared fate to a blind camel, he said, the figure was arresting – but five hundred years of admiration had worn it very thin. To that verdict, which they had all heard many times before, from many mouths, they all likewise gave their nod. Averroës, however, kept silent. At last he spoke, not so much to the others as to himself.

„Less eloquently,“ he said, „and yet with similar arguments, I myself have sometimes defended the proposition argued now by abu-al-Hasan. In Alexandria there is a saying that only the man who has already committed a crime and repented of it is incapable of that crime; to be free of an erroneous opinion, I myself might add, one must at some time have professed it. In his *mu'allaqa*, Zuhayr says that in the course of his eighty years of pain and glory many is the time he has seen destiny trample men, like an old blind camel; abu-al-Hasan says that that figure no longer makes us marvel. One might reply to that objection in many ways. First, that if the purpose of the poem were to astound, its life would be not measured in centuries but in days, or hours, or perhaps even minutes. Second, that a famous poet is less an inventor than a discoverer. In praise of ibn-Sharaf of Berkha, it has many times been said that only he was capable of imagining that the stars of the morning sky fall gently, like leaves falling from the trees; if that were true, it would prove only that the image is trivial. The image that only a single man can shape is an image that interests no man. There are infinite things

upon the earth; any one of them can be compared to any other. Comparing stars to leaves is no less arbitrary than comparing them to fish, or birds. On the other hand, every man has surely felt at some moment in his life that destiny is powerful yet clumsy, innocent yet inhuman. It was in order to record that feeling, which may be fleeting or constant but which no man may escape experiencing, that Zuhayr's line was written. No one will ever say better what Zuhayr said there. Furthermore (and this is perhaps the essential point of my reflections), time, which ravages fortresses and great cities, only *enriches* poetry. At the time it was composed by him in Arabia, Zuhayr's poetry served to bring together two images – that of the old camel and that of destiny; repeated today, it serves to recall Zuhayr and to conflate our own tribulations with those of that dead Arab. The figure *had* two terms; today, it *has* four. Time widens the circle of the verses, and I myself know some verses that are, like music, all things to all men. Thus it was that many years ago, in Marrakesh, tortured by memories of Córdoba, I soothed myself by repeating the apostrophe which 'Abd-al-Rahman spoke in the gardens of al-Rusayfah to an African palm:

Thou too art, oh palm!,  
On this foreign soil...

„A remarkable gift, the gift bestowed by poetry – words written by a king homesick for the Orient served to comfort me when I was far away in Africa, homesick for Spain.“

Then Averroës spoke of the first poets, those who in the Time of Ignorance, before Islam, had already said all things in the infinite language of the deserts. Alarmed (and not without reason) by the inane versifications of ibn-Sharaf, he said that in the ancients and the Qur'an could all poetry be read, and he condemned as illiterate and vain all desire to innovate. The others listened with pleasure, for he was vindicating that which was old.

Muezzins were calling the faithful to the prayer of first light when Averroës entered his library again. (In the harem, the black-haired slave girls had tortured a red-haired slave girl, but Averroës was not to know that until evening.) Something had revealed to him the meaning of the two obscure words. With firm, painstaking calligraphy, he added these lines to the manuscript: *Aristu* ( Aristotle) *gives the name „tragedy“ to panegyrics and the name „comedy“ to satires and anathemas. There are many admirable tragedies and comedies in the Qur'an and the mu'allaqat of the mosque.*

He felt sleep coming upon him, he felt a chill. His turban unwound, he looked at himself in a metal mirror. I do not know what his eyes beheld, for no historian has described the forms of his face. I know that he suddenly disappeared, as though annihilated by a fire without light, and that with him disappeared the house and the unseen fountain and the books and the manuscripts and the turtledoves and the many black-haired slave girls and the trembling red-haired slave girl and Faraj and abu-al-Hasan and the rosebushes and perhaps even the Guadalquivir.

In the preceding tale, I have tried to narrate the process of failure, the process of defeat. I thought first of that archbishop of Canterbury who set himself the task of proving that God exists; then I thought of the alchemists who sought the philosopher's stone; then, of

the vain trisectors of the angle and squares of the circle. Then I reflected that a more poetic case than these would be a man who sets himself a goal that is not forbidden to other men, but is forbidden to him. I recalled Averroës, who, bounded within the circle of Islam, could never know the meaning of the words *tragedy* and *comedy*. I told his story; as I went on, I felt what that god mentioned by Burton must have felt – the god who set himself the task of creating a bull but turned out a buffalo. I felt that the work mocked me, foiled me, thwarted me. I felt that Averroës, trying to imagine what a play is without ever having suspected what a theater is, was no more absurd than I, trying to imagine Averroës yet with no more material than a few snatches from Renan, Lane, and Asin Palacios. I felt, on the last page, that my story was a symbol of the man I had been as I was writing it, and that in order to write that story I had had to be that man, and that in order to be that man I had had to write that story, and so on, *ad infinitum*. ( And just when I stop believing in him, „Averroës“ disappears.)