

THE SEARCH OF/FOR AVERROES:
DIFFERENCE AND TRANSLATION
BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

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La busca de Averroes”¹ tells the story of a day in the work of the twelfth-century Arab philosopher Averroes, in his efforts to translate the Greek Aristotle. More precisely, “La busca de Averroes” is the *imagined* story of a day in the work of Averroes, as the narrator and his own creative efforts to imagine Averroes emerge at the conclusion of the *ficción* to demand a re-consideration of the storytelling itself. In particular, a rereading of the text reveals numerous details connected to translation and difference: from the beginning, names and places and words are translated, each time underscoring the distance between source and target, the changes through time and across space, and also significantly between the Middle and Far Eastern languages of the story and the Spanish in which the narrator narrates the version that we read. In the process, Borges’s text explores the limits of narrative and translation, and perhaps of language itself, in any act of reading or imagining an Other.

Known as “The Commentator,” Averroes lived in Al-Andalus from 1126 to 1198, reaching his highest achievements translating and commenting the works of Aristotle. Western civilization as we know it today owes a great deal to Averroes for the inheritance of Aristotle, and with him the core of Greek thought. “La busca de Averroes” revolves around Averroes’s

1 “La busca de Averroes” was first published in the journal *Sur* in June 1947; it was then included in Borges’s *El Aleph* in 1949.

attempts and finally his inability to accurately translate into Arabic two words, “tragedy” and “comedy,” which he finds from the beginning and throughout the *Poetics*. The text raises the question of how Averroes, despite a distance of fourteen centuries and his ignorance of Syriac and Greek (1: 582)—and as we come to see the even larger constraints of the difference between his worldview and the classical original—manages to be the primary agent in the transmittal of the Greek Aristotle.

But Averroes is not the only translator in the text, as the narrator—in Borges’s voice—emerges at the end of the *ficción* as a translator of sorts, explaining that he has undertaken a task analogous to Averroes’s: as Herculean and Quixotic as his subject’s, we could say. The text thus creates a parallel between the distances that Averroes must have had to cross as a translator of Aristotle, and that which Borges is seeking to cross in his attempts to imagine Averroes (imagining Aristotle). The parallel is expanded to a series when we realize, as readers, that we undertake an analogous task in imagining Borges as Borges is in imagining Averroes, and Averroes was in imagining Aristotle. Thus does reading and imagining in Borges become synonymous with translation—or better yet, mis-translation: a process flawed yet rich in potential and possibilities in its very equivocation.

Averroes’s struggles to overcome the apparently unbridgeable distances that he faces, the difference between texts, languages, historic periods, and religions, can be better understood if we read the *ficción* alongside Borges’s other texts on translation. The most germane of these for our discussion here is “Los traductores de *Las 1001 Noches*” (1935). As I detail elsewhere,² in his essays on the topic Borges argues that translations are not necessarily inferior to originals, that the concept of a “definitive text” is a fallacy, and that the merit of a translation, paradoxically, resides in its “creative infidelities.” Inverting many of the basic tenets of translation theory, Borges repeatedly questions the concept of originality, often finding potentiality where others find loss.

In “Los traductores de *Las 1001 Noches*,” for example, Borges compares the European translations of the collection *Alf Layla wa-Layla*—most commonly known in English as the *Arabian Nights*—beginning with Galland’s

2 See my *Borges and Translation*.

version of 1704-1717. In his discussion of Richard F. Burton's version of the *Nights*, Borges takes on the question of how a text should be translated from one context and readership to another, when these are vastly different: from thirteenth-century Arabia, in this case, to nineteenth-century London. Borges tells us that Burton makes countless substitutions; that he completely rewrites several of the stories; and that he undertakes numerous alterations, omissions, and interpolations. Borges then concludes, in a surprising twist, that these changes are actually for the best. The merit of the translation, as Borges sees it, lies in its *infidelities*. The value of such mis-translation is most clear in the discussion of the 1889 French version by J.C. Mardrus, when Borges argues that Mardrus's accomplishment lies not in his literalness and supposed fidelity, but in his creative infidelities: "To celebrate Mardrus's fidelity is to omit Mardrus's soul, it is to not even speak of Mardrus. It is his infidelity, his creative and joyful infidelity, with which we should be concerned" (OC 1: 240; my translation).

As he presents his arguments in "Los traductores de *Las 1001 Noches*," Borges does not deny that the Europeans whose translations he compares, and especially those he most highly praises, domesticate the *Arabian Nights* in their efforts to make them more interesting for their contemporaries back home. The fact that Borges approves of such acculturation of these Near Eastern stories might suggest that he is assuming an Orientalist position.³ But the issue with Borges—the issue with Borges's Orientalism—is complicated by the fact that he is speaking from the margins, from Argentina, and not at all from the center of empire. In the history of translation into English or French, a translation that domesticates the "foreignness" of the original can be interpreted as part of an Orientalist project of cultural imperialism.⁴ In Latin America, however, such a translation can represent an appropriation from the Metropolis through linguistic acculturation and a way to challenge not only the supposed supremacy of the original, but also of the cultural political power of the society in which it was produced.

3 The translators of the *Arabian Nights* are very much the Orientalists studied by Edward Said. For critiques of Burton's Orientalism in particular, see, for example, Kabbani, and Carbonell Cortés.

4 On Anglo-American domesticating translation, see Venuti, Niranjana, and Cheyfitz.

Interestingly, Galland, Burton, Mardrus, in all their blatant Orientalism, function as (mis-translators) precursors of Borges. But so does Averroes. In this sense, Borges's valorization of and identification with Averroes adds to a complex, destabilizing Orientalism from Borges's South. This is consistent with the main characteristics of a certain "Hispanic Orientalism," as Julia Kushigian has studied it, which:

distinguishes itself in a momentary blending of opposites and interanimation of images grounded in a respect for diversity. This Orientalism reflects not so much a political posture toward the Orient rendered in innumerable oppositional structures but is, rather, a more thoughtful approach that values a dialogue of discourses, reflecting on antithetical denial of and openness to the Other. (10)

The interactions in "La busca de Averroes" are complex, as Borges (the South American writer, working from one periphery: Argentina⁵) imagines Averroes (the Arab thinker, working from another periphery: Moorish Andalusia) imagining Aristotle (the foundational Greek Aristotle, a central and defining member of Western civilization), in a process that constantly emphasizes the role of reading and our role as readers in this sophisticated web of cultural political relationships.

Borges's "more thoughtful approach," to use Kushigian's phrase, reworks the origins of Occidental traditions, here in the form of the foundational *Poetics*, while bringing to the forefront the role of Arabic thinkers in the history of Western civilization, as well as the potential of the edge of South America in opening dialogues and discourses of and to the Other. "La busca de Averroes" works with Averroes's peripheral yet dynamic relationship with Aristotle; and, on a larger scale, Islam and the Arab world's peripheral yet dynamic relationship with the West. In a remapping of centers and peripheries past and present, Averroes's relationship with Aristotle is drawn in parallel to Borges's own peripheral yet dynamic relationship with European traditions, and, on a larger scale, Latin America's peripheral yet dynamic relationship with the West.⁶

5 On the history of Argentine Orientalism, see Civantos.

6 As Sylvia Molloy has said, in her analysis of "El escritor argentino y la tradición": "Borges reclama esa marginalidad, justificándola plenamente, para toda la literatura hispanoamericana. Mejor: para toda literatura lateral... La irreverencia parece consecuencia inevitable de esa marginalidad aceptada y asumida: declararse marginal —es decir

The implications of this remapping are revealed as we navigate some of the subtleties of “La busca de Averroes.” The irony of the *ficción*, as critics have pointed out,⁷ is that as he ponders how to translate the words “tragedy” and “comedy” into Arabic, Averroes actually encounters several examples of these very same dramatic concepts, but does not recognize them as the solution he seeks. Early in the story, Averroes observes a group of children playing outside his balcony and does not realize that their game is precisely the kind of play-acting involved in “drama.” Later that evening, Averroes also fails to recognize, like everyone else at a dinner party, that the story that the traveler Abulcásim recounts of an event that he witnessed in China is a form of the “tragedy” discussed in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The event that Abulcásim witnessed turns out to be a dramatic play, of course.

Averroes cannot read these examples as “tragedy” or “comedy” because his worldview does not include a conceptual framework that would allow him to interpret them as such.⁸ The words “tragedy” and “comedy,” for Averroes, are signs devoid of meaning; they are mere signifiers to which Averroes, at the end of Borges’s story, finally attaches incorrect significations. As Jon Stewart has observed: “[Averroes] is ultimately limited to the epistemological categories of his culture” (327). Averroes’s failed search suggests that there are certain fundamental differences between languages and cultures that are too large to overcome. In this way, Borges’s text highlights the definitive role of cultural and socio-historical contexts in producing and determining meaning.

But Averroes’s failed search for Aristotle, we know, is only part of the story. In the last paragraph of “La busca de Averroes,” Borges makes an overt entrance onto the stage of the text as the narrator to tell us of his inability to imagine and recreate Averroes. This limitation, the narrator tells

excéntrico— equivale a constituir un centro en la misma circunferencia, a reconocer la existencia del centro tradicional y a definirse con respecto a él, pero también a alejarse deliberadamente de ese centro, para verlo mejor y —si fuera necesario— para burlarse de él” (60-61). See also Sarlo.

7 See, for example, Stewart and Balderston.

8 See Dapía for a discussion of the concepts of “context,” “framework,” “conceptual scheme,” and “paradigm” in “La busca de Averroes.”

us, is very much akin to Averroes's inability to imagine and recreate—in other words, to translate—Aristotle:

En la historia anterior quise narrar el proceso de una derrota.... Recordé a Averroes, que encerrado en el ámbito del Islam, nunca pudo saber el significado de las voces tragedia y comedia.... Sentí que la obra se burlaba de mí. Sentí que Averroes, queriendo imaginar lo que es un drama sin haber sospechado lo que es un teatro, no era más absurdo que yo, queriendo imaginar a Averroes, sin otro material que unos adarnes de Renan, de Lane y de Asín Palacios. (OC 1: 587-88)

In the foregoing story, I tried to narrate the process of a defeat.... I remembered Averroes who, closed within the orb of Islam, could never know the meaning of the terms *tragedy* and *comedy*.... I felt that the work was mocking me. I felt that Averroes, wanting to imagine what a drama is without ever having suspected what a theater is, was no more absurd than I, wanting to imagine Averroes with no other sources than a few fragments from Renan, Lane and Asín Palacios. (*Labyrinths* 155)

We note, too, the Orientalism of Borges's sources, and especially of his primary source, Renan and his 1861 *Averroès et l'Averroïsme*.⁹ Again, as with the Orientalist translators from "Los traductores de *Las 1001 Noches*," in "La busca de Averroes" Borges displaces and transforms his sources. Borges's Orientalism actually challenges the traditional East-West political and cultural power relationships established by the traditional French and English Orientalists studied by Said. In fact, Borges's Orientalism suggests a new alignment, one in which apparently unrelated peripheries (South America and *rioplatense* Spanish; an Arab philosopher in Moorish Andalusia) align in a dialectical relationship with the center and become protagonists in that center's—i.e., Western civilization's—foundational core.

This realignment is doubly efficacious if we keep in mind that Borges's story involves two searches and their analogous, parallel apparent failures. The title of the story captures this ambiguity in Spanish, as "La busca *de* Averroes" denotes both Averroes's search for Aristotle *and* the narrator's search for Averroes. Although the *ficción* has been well translated as "Averroes' Search," a more accurate, though admittedly awkward

9 As Fishburn and Hughes state: "Much of what is said about [Averroes] in "Averroes' Search" stems from Renan's *Averroès et l'Averroïsme*" (24). As Said details, Renan is a central figure in European Orientalism through much of the nineteenth century. See especially Said 130-50. On Lane's Orientalism, see Said 160-67.

translation of the title in English might be “The Search of/for Averroes”.¹⁰ The entire story, in fact, is structured as a series of searches for and of a text (and its writer) by a reader/translator whose only access is through other texts: all subjective mediations worked through translations of translations. Averroes searches for Aristotle, but he is forced to work “on the translation of a translation” (*Labyrinths* 149). Similarly, Borges searches for Averroes, but, as we have seen, the narrator acknowledges that the only material available to him is “a few fragments from Renan, Lane and Asín Palacios” (*Labyrinths* 155).

As Daniel Balderston explains, the Orientalist Renan was himself very far from Averroes, for Renan too worked on translations of translations.¹¹ Renan’s distance from his subject reminds us that every search in “La busca de Averroes” is displaced and necessarily reconfigured. The distance between each reader, text, and context must be traversed by a process of translation that seems defined by its inevitable failure: Aristotle ↔ Averroes ↔ Renan ↔ Borges ↔ reader. Averroes is defined by his search for/translation of Aristotle, just as Borges’s narrator is defined by his process of imagining/recreating Averroes. Likewise, the reader is defined by his/her process of reading Borges. This emphasis on reading, imagining, and recreating the Other transforms the reader into a leading protagonist in the construction of meaning. At the same time, meaning is shown to be culturally and linguistically determined, where languages are always posited in and by difference. The original, the elusive, Aristotle, in this case, flashes as real and as fictionally constructed as Cervantes in Pierre Menard’s *Don Quixote*.

The reader/translator/writer exists only in the process of searching for an Other. His/her identity is constituted of the search itself. This search, this desire for the Other, leads one to confront, and to reside, in difference. Desire, search, process, difference, identity: these are the elements at play in “La busca de Averroes.” The levels of mediation, from Aristotle to Averroes

10 The story has been translated as “Averroes’ Search”; this includes the excellent translation by James E. Irby, from which I quote in this article. The more recent translation by Andrew Hurley is strong and noticeable for the detail and attention paid to the etymology of the text.

11 As Balderston has found, Renan himself remarks 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” (204).

to Borges to us, through Renan and the other translations of translations along the way, suggest a vertiginous circulation of texts, a confusion that is only temporarily resolved during the process of reading: of imagining, of writing, of translation. But it is also a process that deteriorates once that process is abandoned. In “La busca de Averroes,” this deterioration is figured by the disappearance of Averroes in front of the mirror right after he has reached his incorrect interpretation of the words tragedy and comedy, and by the disappearance of the narrator once he ceases to think about Averroes.

The passage from one text and context to the other creates as much distance as it does proximity. A series of refractions enacted through mis-translation, in which what one repeatedly encounters, from one (per-) version to the next, is otherness itself—one’s own otherness. As seen in Borges’s hall of deceptive mirrors, the foundational text of literary theory, the *Poetics*, is thus deterritorialized. The very process of multiple readings, rewritings, and re-imaginings is what produces meaning, and what allows Borges to recreate Averroes from Argentina, just as Averroes recreated Aristotle from Arabic Al-Andalus, through translations of translations. Near the beginning of “La busca de Averroes,” the text itself points at such an aesthetics of mis-translation, when Borges the narrator says:

Pocas cosas más bellas y más patéticas registrará la historia que esa consagración de un médico árabe a los pensamientos de un hombre de quien lo separaban catorce siglos; a las dificultades intrínsecas debemos añadir que Averroes, ignorante del siríaco y del griego, trabajaba sobre la traducción de una traducción. (OC 1: 582)

Few things more beautiful and more pathetic are recorded in history than this Arab physician’s dedication to the thoughts of a man separated from him by fourteen centuries; to the intrinsic difficulties we should add that Averroes, ignorant of Syriac and of Greek, was working with the translation of a translation. (*Labyrinths* 149)

Pathos yes, but also beauty, as in the beauty of processes of mis-translation that put texts in motion and delight in difference and displacement.

By displaying Averroes’s cultural, linguistic, and historic constraints, Borges also implies the limitations of our worldview. This move destabilizes the notion of Western philosophy, or of the Modern Occident, as a fixed center. To the extent that “La busca de Averroes” is about the search

for the origins of literary theory, of Aristotle's *Poetics*, it is about the impossibility of fixing such an origin. Borges shows us that our attempts at recovering, at imagining and rewriting the *Poetics*, can only be undertaken through a series of translations of translations, replete with equivocation and misinterpretation.

Averroes necessarily approached Aristotle from an edge, from the outside looking in and back and, as Borges's *ficción* suggests, for an imagined reader in the future. Borges plays this role for Averroes, as we play it for Borges. The imagined reader of the future is enacted in the reading of Borges's text. Reading of Averroes, an Arab working in Moorish Iberia, in Borges, himself working from his specific South American edge, brings reading—including ours—into the creation of the *ficción* itself. This series of Chinese boxes underscores the importance of the reader in every step of the creation of meaning and tradition.

It is not hard to imagine why Borges would be interested in someone like Averroes, a translator forced to work with imperfect tools as he sought to recreate a fading original that he imagines, we might imagine Borges imagining, is at the very core of Western civilization. A civilization to which he does and does not quite belong, a foundation he glimpses from an uncertain outside—literally before a mirror (1: 587)—that at times feels like the inside, or like a path that might lead inside, especially in the act of reading—in the act of reading equivocally in another language and rewriting it slightly off in one's own—in the act of translating from and toward a text that is always about to reveal itself. That is imminently about to reveal itself, but never quite does.

Whatever we might say about Averroes we can for the most part say about Borges. Averroes figures not only as Borges's precursor, but actually as his double. And instead of saying Averroes here we can also say Aristotle, in a game of shifting reflections and displacements similar to the ones that lead us from Borges's narrator to Pierre Menard to Cervantes and back again. In this case, Borges is as close to the Arab Averroes—close at least in the process of imagining him, of re-telling him, in the imaginative telling of his story—as the French Symbolist Pierre Menard is to the Golden Age Cervantes. The text, reread after we incorporate the ending into our horizon, hovers on the border between imagining and chronicling, between languages and everything that comes with languages, between East and

West, between past and present, between Muslim and Judeo-Christian worldviews. The text, in other words, hovers on an equivocal border of in-betweenness.

We conclude, then, with the importance of equivocation as a means of transforming major discourses and legitimizing the emerging literatures of the periphery. And we say *mis*-translation because translation in Latin America, like every act of reading and writing, is a transformative event that includes an account of the distances and differences between center and peripheries. Translation in Latin America is innovation as resistance: acknowledgment of difference and loss; transformation into potentiality and gain. As “La busca de Averroes” illustrates, difference in language is inherently linked to difference in culture, religion, historic time period, and thus to one’s worldview. These distinctions are certainly limiting, but in the reading and imagining of the distance between them, when texts and differences are placed in motion, as in Averroes’s search for Aristotle, or Borges’s search for Averroes—in the search of/for Averroes—they are also be full of potential.

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