AVICENNA'S PHILOSOPHICAL STORIES:
ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS* REINTERPRETED

BY

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For Lucy and Sari Nuseibeh

Among Avicenna's many works, his stories (*qisas*) have a very special place, by virtue both of their form and of their content. While most of Avicenna's shorter compositions are devoted to specific problems, in the stories Avicenna endeavours to present his philosophy as a whole, though in a miniature version. But scholars disagree as to the nature of this philosophy: does it represent Aristotelian teaching? or profound spiritual *gnosis*? Scholars agree that the stories are written in a peculiar style, but disagree as to the philosophical significance of this fact. A.-M. Goichon, indeed, believes that it has none: For her, Avicenna wrote the stories as "a poetic and profound game" to divert him during his imprisonment at Farahgan. For Dimitri Gutas the stories represent an example of the symbolic method as used by the Aristotelian philosopher; since the symbolic method is "by its very nature... inferior to the demonstrative", its main function must also be modest: "to impart to the common people... that much of the knowledge as is necessary for their social and eschatological well-being". Henri Corbin alone

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1 This paper has benefited from the comments of several friends and colleagues. In particular I wish to thank Rina Drory, Guy Stroumsa and Frank Stewart for their very helpful suggestions.


3 Corbin, p. 23. See also Gardet, *humanisme*, p. 825.


5 Gutas, p. 306.

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I. Avicenna's Stories

Avicenna wrote three stories:

a) *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* is the tale of an encounter with a vigorous old man who invites the writer (and the reader) to a fantastic journey through unknown realms in the cosmos, a journey which culminates in a vision of the King.9

b) *The Story of Salâman and Absâl* (the original Avicennian version of which is lost, and which is known to us only through Tusti's Persian commentary)10 tells of King Salâman and his beloved brother Absal. Salâman's lustful wife schemes to gain the favours of Absal. Absal's persistent refusal to submit to her, despite all his sufferings, leads to the tragic end of the story.

c) *The Epistle of the Bird*11 recounts the misfortunes and the emotions of a bird that is ensnared by hunters and held in captivity. With the help of other birds it awakens to the possibility of regaining its freedom and returns to its place of origin.

Avicenna's three stories have several features in common. All three have a more or less dramatic plot and an apparently obvious message, and all are written in a flowery style which occasionally slides into rhymed prose.12

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11 Gutas, p. 305, n. 10.
13 Malachi (p. 317) and Levine (p. 584) correctly point out that, in contrast to Ibn Ezra's Hebrew version of *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* or to the Hebrew version of *The

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I.1 The literary background

Avicenna did not invent these stories from scratch: similar allegorical writings were known in the east before the rise of Islam. A version of *The Story of Salâman and Absâl* was translated from Greek by Hunayn ibn Ishâq11. The theme of *The Epistle of the Bird* is also not new: the Syriac *Hymn of the Pearl* carries much the same message and has a similar plot13.

After the Arab conquests in the East, the Indians and Persians introduced the Arabs to animal tales, among them *Kadija va-Dimna*. These stories were meant to amuse while at the same time carrying a practical moral message. It seems that such edifying literature is also the source of the *Epistle of the Animals*, the twenty-first of the *Epistles of the Pure Brethren*14. Unlike *Kadija va-Dimna*, this epistle does not offer moral or practical advice to the ruler, but rather a philosophico-theological message: *The animate world is hierarchically, and just as human beings are, by nature, superior to animals, so are the prophets superior by nature to other humans. The Epistles of the Pure Brethren are generally admitted to be connected to the Isma'ilis, although the precise nature of the connection is still debated by scholars*. In any case, it seems that the Isma'ili's favoured the use of such allegories, and in the Isma'ili *Kitab al-guldân wal-mutâ'âlîm* the allegory develops into a full-fledged initiation story15.

Syriac allegories, Indian parables and Isma'ili initiation stories were, then, widely known before Avicenna, and are probably the background to his stories. But with Avicenna the allegorical stories

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develop on an unprecedented scale. With him, the philosophical stories emerge as a fully fledged literary genre. Avicenna is innovative in his persistence in the use of this literary form, a persistence that bespeaks the importance he granted it. One can imagine a philosopher who writes a single story to pass away the time in a dreary prison, or as an exercise for students, but it takes more motivation than boredom or a passing didactic impulse to write three different stories. Another indication of the seriousness with which Avicenna treated his own stories is his references to them in his other works.

1.2 Later Philosophical stories

After Avicenna the genre spreads and becomes quite popular. Avicenna's stories were translated into Hebrew, and some of the translators elaborated on the initial Avicennian stories. A number of Muslim thinkers also wrote their own stories. A complete list of these works would carry us too far afield, but we can mention a few of the more famous items, for instance an Epistle of the Bird written by al-Gazālī (d. 1111), a Ḥājī ibn Yaqūn written by Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185) and another one written by Şīhāb al-Dīn al-Subrawdī (d. 1191), who also wrote an Epistle of the Bird and some other allegorical stories, and a story by Ibn al-Naffīs (d. 1269) entitled al-Risāla al-kāmilīyya fi l-sīra l-nabawīyya.

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Most, if not all, of the stories written by these Muslim philosophers are, in fact, Avicenna's stories recycled. Avicenna's influence is already apparent in the titles of the works mentioned above. A closer examination of these works reveals the extent of this influence. To cite just two examples: Ibn Ṭufayl's book incorporates elements which are borrowed not only from Avicenna's Ḥājī but also from Ṣalāḥīn ibn ṬawāḤa, while the story of Subrawdī's Ṣarṭūr, entitled The Western Exile, draws on both Ḥājī ibn Yaqūn and The Epistle of the Bird. But the influence is not limited to the literary components of the stories. Both Ibn Ṭufayl and Subrawdī admit that their own stories were written as improvements on, or as retorts to, the philosophical ideas presented in Avicenna's story.

Yet in reading these later stories one gets a growing sense of the difference both in form and content between Avicenna's original stories and their later imitations.

As regards form, even the Hebrew versions of Avicenna's own stories differ from the original: they are written in rhymed prose, and become more like a maqāma. The clearest difference in form is between Avicenna's stories and that of Ibn Ṭufayl (and hence also of Ibn al-Naffīs, who follows him). Ibn Ṭufayl writes a longer story in prose, a novel. The figures of Ḥājī, the boy who grows up in total solitude, and of the people he meets on a neighbouring island, provide the literary, legendary frame to this novel. But the core of the novel describes Ḥājī's development until he achieves complete knowledge and illumination, and there is hardly any legendary or fictitious element here. Far from being metaphorical or allegorical, Ibn Ṭufayl's novel is an explicit, beautifully written, manual for the initiate.

As regards content, the plots and the symbols of the later compositions have some original elements compared to Avicenna's
stories. But the main difference is apparent in the intention of the writers. Ibn al-Nafis is interested in theological and juridical questions, not in philosophy proper. And as to Ibn Tufayl and Suhrawardi, they both declare that they wrote their compositions because of some dissatisfaction they felt with Avicenna’s teaching in his stories.

The consideration of these differences leads us to realize that, although Avicenna’s followers seem to have liked the idea of a story, what they wrote was very different from Avicenna’s stories. If they really tried to follow him, they somehow missed his intentions.

II. Scholarly interpretations of Avicenna’s Stories

What, then, was Avicenna’s intention in using this genre? The answer to this question must refer to both the content of the stories and their form. Avicenna himself provides us with the key to the correct way to read his stories. In his Books of Remarks and Pointers, his last work on metaphysics, Avicenna says:

Those who have divine knowledge vary in their rank and level, and this distinguishes them from others even as they are in their terrestrial life. It is as if they don’t have bodies like the dead, which they later take off, shedding them (as they turn) towards the world of sainthood. These possess covert matters, as well as matters which are manifest by them. The ignorant disapprove of these matters, but those who know cherish them. We shall tell you of these matters (naphala). So if, among things that you happen to hear, you come to hear the story (qissa) of Salamān and Abdāl, know that Salamān is a parable (naphal) for yourself, whereas Abdāl is a parable for your rank in divine knowledge, if you deserve it. Now follow this hint (nana) if you can.

Avicenna tells us quite plainly that the story (qīsā) needs to be interpreted, and that grosse modo the interpretation must refer to the spiritual way of ‘those who know’. But the search for a more precise understanding of the stories and the knowledge to which they lead have given rise to various interpretations.

II.1 Avicenna’s disciples

Avicenna’s immediate disciples, Ibn Zaylā and Ğuzgānī, wrote meticulous commentaries of Hāpp. A short example from such a commentary may not be superfluous:

As I was sojourning in my own country, I had the opportunity to make an outing with my companions to one of the gardens which surround this valley: ... His own country is his body and the members thereof, which are the substrate of his faculties. By an outing means an awakening to the awareness that beyond the life of the body and its members there is another, spiritual life. The gardens are matters for removed from the levels in which he was previously involved, by this he means the intelligibles.

Obviously, Ibn Zaylā took the stories to be a scrupulously coded message which must be decoded word by word. Tūsī, who was a more distant disciple of Avicenna, apparently shared this view, for his commentary on The Story of Salamān and Abdāl follows the same pattern as Ibn Zaylā’s and Ğuzgānī’s. This approach has the advantage of offering an explanation of the details of the story, an explanation which is well grounded in Avicenna’s own philosophy.

The commentaries guide us safely through the intricacies of Avicenna’s metaphysical views. But the style of the commentaries is the exact opposite of the one which characterizes Avicenna’s stories. Dry, flat, and quite uninspiring, these commentaries highlight the peculiarities of Avicenna’s style. In other words, a commentary that treats the Avicennian story as an allegory may provide sound explanation for its details. But in doing so it also robs the story of its specific character, a character to which Avicenna himself apparently attached special importance.

28 Goldmann, p. 96.
30 ‘Nana’—a meaningful wink, an indicative sign, a hint, and hence a clue that help to solve a riddle. Here the riddle is the philosophical story, and the hint (nana) is the indicative sign (ilāna). Gutas’ distinction between an image (naphal) and an aggregate of symbols, an allegory (nana; Gutas, p. 305), is unacceptable, since it identifies the hint with the story to which it relates. When the stories are referred to as nana, this word again indicates their being a hint about something else, not their literary form (for example, Goldmann, p. 95; ‘nana’ Ḥāpp ibn Yūṣūf... ra’īsan ṣan al-Saq al-fāṣil).
32 Corbin, pp. 62-88; Goichon, pp. 7-8.
33 Meuhren, pp. 1-2.
II.2 Goichon’s Interpretation

The approach of Avicenna’s disciples was adopted in modern times by Goichon, who explained the text of *Hārūn ibn Yaqẓān* on the basis of the commentaries of Avicenna’s disciples and of his own philosophy. She regards Avicenna’s stories as philosophical parables, intended to transmit the philosophical truth, or as riddles that await their deciphering. But she does not provide a serious explanation for Avicenna’s predilection for the use of parables or of riddles. For Goichon, *qisā* can be rendered in French as a «récit», provided that we «understand it in the simple sense». In other words, the story is only a literary form, and as such it has no philosophical role. Its philosophical content can be—and in fact has been—conveyed just as well in other literary forms.

II.3 Gutas’s Interpretation

Goichon’s assumption was lately taken up and developed by Gutas, who regards Avicenna’s stories as an example of the use of the symbolic method by the philosophers. In order to understand Gutas’s view, we must first briefly describe the main characteristics of this use.

II.4 The Symbolic Method as Used by the Philosophers

The *falāsīfa* (i.e., Medieval Aristotelian philosophers) regarded the use of fables, enigmas, allegories and myths as a vital need of philosophy in human societies. «In the opinion of these medieval thinkers, the mythical mode of expression, when used by a philosopher, constituted a deliberate concealment of theoretical truths». Sometimes, when used by the *falāsīfa* themselves, this deliberate concealment was dictated by expediency: if non-philosophers are prematurely exposed to philosophical truth, they may regard it as a shocking heresy. Equivocal speech was thus meant to protect the philosopher from the accusation of holding heterodox views. Perhaps even more important is the fact that the mythical mode of expres-

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34 Goichon, especially, pp. 9 and 15-17.
35 Goichon, p. 15.
36 Pines, «Philosophic Sources», p. LXXV.
39 Gutas, p. 302.
pretation of the Scriptures. Their allegorical compositions are few, and consist mostly of short parables within the framework of their apodictic writings.

There is, indeed, reason to believe that Avicenna's stories do not fit the model of the falsafā's use of the symbolic method at all. The philosophers often insist on the need to hide from the multitude the very fact that something is being hidden from them. To discover that a text is symbolic is already half way to discovering its content. The fact that something is a parable should therefore be pointed out only to those people who have been properly prepared and are considered worthy candidates for philosophic knowledge. Avicenna, for instance, says:

Nor is it proper for any man to reveal that he possesses knowledge that he is hiding from the vulgar. Indeed, he must not permit any reference to this fact.

Although, according to Avicenna,

It is not wrong for his speech to contain hints and pointers (ra'īs va-taḥān) which urge those who are naturally predisposed to engage in philosophical research to do so.

The prohibition on divulging both the meaning of an esoteric text and the fact that it is esoteric was usually taken very seriously by both the philosophers and their followers. Let us examine Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed, a classical case of a philosopher's sort of writing. This book was meant by its author to be a discourse (maqāla) that, by using ambiguous or contradictory sentences, would keep the truth hidden from those who are not fit to hear it. Maimonides beseeched the philosophers who attained the truth from this book not to disclose it. His followers invested much effort in the attempt to discover 'the secret of the Guide,' and they wrote about their findings. But they often disagree in their interpretation; and even the most outspoken of them themselves use ambiguous language, or apologize profusely for disregarding Maimonides' demand that the truth be kept secret.

If we return now to Avicenna's stories, we may note (a) that the fact that Avicenna calls attention to the parabolic nature of The Story of Saliham and Absal shows that this story (and presumably also the other stories) is not intended for the vulgar. As noted above, the Platonic view of mythical discourse does not allow the masses to know that something is being hidden from them. And indeed, Avicenna tells us that the audience for which this story is intended are those who can hope for the rank of divine knowledge. b) The remarkable agreement of the commentaries raises serious questions concerning Avicenna's talent as a riddle-teller; if he intended the stories to be veiled discourses, he did not succeed very well. And (c), if the master intended his discourse to be veiled, his students seem to have had surprisingly little respect for his intentions, for they disclose the meaning of the stories in a plain, matter-of-fact manner, without any scruples.

Maimonides' Guide and its commentaries fit the description presented above of 'mythical discourse' as used by Aristotelian philosophers. The commentaries on Avicenna enable us to realize that his stories do not fit this description. The stories do not hide anything, nor do they disclose a secret, unknown teaching. They repeat a teaching which, at a certain philosophical level, is well-known.

II.5 Corbin's Interpretation

The shortcomings of the commentator's approach were noted already by Corbin, and in his masterly study of the stories he endeavoured to avoid these shortcomings. Like the other commen-


———. See, for instance, Dafā'ī al-Ḥaṭīrī, introduction, p. 9: 21-29 (Guide, p. 14): In some matters it will suffice you to gather from my remarks that a given story is a parable, even if we explain nothing more; for once you know it is a parable, it will immediately become clear to you what it is a parable of. My remarking that it is a parable will be like someone's removing a screen from between the eye and a visible thing.

———. Avicenna, Healing, Metaphysics X, translated by M. E. Marmura, in Lerner and Mahdi, p. 100. See also Gutas, p. 307.


———. The translator of the Guide, Samuel Ibn Tibbīn, was often criticized for being a gossip who cannot keep a secret (hubbah rafīl a-magāl sālī), to that is say, for being indirect or for breaking the secrecy imposed by Maimonides; see A. Ravitzky, 'The Secret Teachings of the Guide: The Commentators in his Time and in Guria', Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought 5 (1986), p. 36 (in Hebrew); Also Idrīs, 'Samuel Ibn Tibbīn and the Esoteric Character of the Guide of the Perplexed', ASOR bulletin 6 (1981), p. 91, n. 16.

———. Which is basically the approach adopted also by Gohin and Gutas.
tators, Corbin's point of departure in his interpretation is Avicenna's own philosophy, and he assumes that the details of the stories are metaphors that need to be interpreted. But he also assumes that the story as a whole has a specific philosophical meaning. Avicenna designates the stories as qisas, a word the root of which is qisas. A verb with the same root means, among other things, «to follow in the footsteps of somebody». For Corbin, the choice of this term is of capital importance. According to him, the qisas is indeed a «recital», in which the reader is called upon to situate himself in the place of the hero and re-live his experiences.

While avoiding the difficulties we noted above in the disciples' commentaries, Corbin's approach is problematic in other ways. It is not only that, in his enthusiasm for the spiritual understanding, Corbin is sometimes carried away to the point of rewriting the Avicennian text, but also that his interpretation of the stories as a whole comprises a major difficulty. Corbin seeks to find in the stories a spiritual Avicenna, different from Avicenna the logician and Avicenna the Peripatetic philosopher. According to Corbin, it is the Spiritual Avicenna who wrote the «recitals». Consequently Corbin sees no essential difference between Avicenna's stories and those written by Suhrawardi, Ṣayḥ al-Iṣraʾil. One could almost say that Corbin reads Avicenna's stories as a commentary on Suhrawardi. But, as noted above, Suhrawardi himself did not share this view, for he believed that Avicenna's stories needed some rewriting.

The differences between the stories written by Avicenna and those written, on the one hand, by Ḥarāt thinkers such as Suhrawardi, and on the other hand, by such philosophers as Ibn Tufayl, cannot be ignored. Indeed, Avicenna is not only the first, but also the only Aristotelian philosopher to devote such a sustained effort to the writing of philosophical stories. In order to better understand the peculiarity of Avicenna's stories, we must now turn to another literary genre in the use of which Avicenna is somewhat unusual.

III. Avicenna's poetry and the Poetics

Among the Aristotelian philosophers, Avicenna's attitude to poetry is as peculiar as the importance he gives to stories. Al-Farabi and Averroes saw poetry as a means of education to be used only in the most limited fashion. A Jewish philosopher like Maimonides, who had no attachment to the Arab poetic tradition, felt free to express his disdain for poetry in a more pronounced way. Muslim philosophers had to accept poetry, because it was part of their culture and could hardly be avoided. But they did so with reluctance, and it is hard to imagine al-Farabi, Ibn Baġga or Averroes writing true poetry.

65 Avicenna is the only eminent philosopher considered as belonging to the Aristotelian school with regard to whom Maimonides, in his letter to Ibn Tibbīn, expresses some reservations and even some mistrust (Pines, Introduction to the Guide, p. xxii). It is possible that Maimonides' ambivalent attitude to parables, which he clearly expresses when speaking of Plato (see A. Marx, «Texts by and about Maimonides», JQR XXV, 1935, p. 380), contributed also to his reluctance to recommend the works of Avicenna. This despite the fact that Maimonides himself uses parables relatively often, for example Dašād at-Ḥarīrī, III, 51, p. 454-455 (Guide, p. 618-619).


68 For a list of the works in verse written by Averroes (which are mostly of the mnemonic or didactic kind), see Salvador Gomez Nogales, Bibliografia sobre las obras de Averroes, in J. Jolivet, ed., Multiple Averroes (Paris, 1970), pp. 386-387. The few lines of verse with which Maimonides introduces his Commentary on the Mishna can hardly count as a poem or an independent piece.
But Avicenna did. His Ode of the Soul[^55] is, in many respects, a miniature version of the Epistle of the Bird[^48]. It recounts the fall of the soul, its longing to return to its heavenly abode, and its return. This gnostic myth is presented in rhymed hexameters, and is labeled "a qaṣīda". Avicenna's stories are not qāṣīdā, and are never so described. Yet they too are clearly poetic creations[^87]. Unlike the Ode, the stories are not classical poems. But they are also not didactic compositions, like Avicenna's Poem on Medicine. To what poetic genre do the qāṣīs belong?

III. The Falāšiṣṭa and the Poetics

The clue to this puzzle may be found in Avicenna's commentary on Aristotle's Poetics. The Poetics was translated along with the other books of Aristotle, and, following the Alexandrian Commentators, was considered to be part of the Organon[^88]. As such, it attracted the same serious attention that the falāšiṣṭa accorded to Aristotle's works on logic. But since the translation movement did not include belles lettres, the falāšiṣṭa were not familiar with the kind of literature dealt with in the Poetics. They read about tragedies, comedies and dramas without ever having read anything of Aeschylus or of Homer[^89]. The meaning of the Poetics therefore remained a mystery to them[^88].


[^48]: *The Simplicius* was noted by Goichon, p. 15.

[^88]: *Aristotelis* by Goichon, p. 15, and see also above, note 3. On the other hand, see Henri Jahn and Abdelkader Noureddine, *Dictionnaire des sujets poétiques attribués à Avicenne* (Algeria, 1960), pp. 10, 15, according to whom "in the stories... poetry has only a limited role."


[^56]: Gardel, "Humanisme," p. 815; G. Wiet, "Les traducteurs arabes de la poésie grecque," *Mélanges René d'Anvers* (1950), pp. 36-36; J. Kremer, "Arabische Homerübersetzung," *ZDMG* 106 (1956), p. 259. Hūnayn ibn Isḥāq was an exception to the rule, in that he seems to have read some Homer (G. Strohmaier, "Homer in Baghdad," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 41, 1980, pp. 196-200). But the scope of his knowledge in this domain seems to have been rather limited. Note the marked discrepancy between his ability to reconstruct the medical works of Galen and his bewilderment concerning a faulty text by Aristophanes (M. Meyerhof, "La version arabe d'un Traité perdu de Galien," *Byzantion* 3, 1926, pp. 413-414, especially pp. 414-415).

[^57]: As noted, for example, Daiyāt, p. 20; and A. Trabut, *La critique poétique des Arabes* (Damascus, 1996), pp. 74-76. Al-Sirāṭ's criticism of the philosophers

The Arab philosophers were to some extent aware of the fact that they lacked the tools to understand the Poetics, and they even admitted it. But they refused to exclude it from their teaching. Having to explain what they did not understand, they turned to what they did know. Al-Fārābī circumvented the difficulty by summing up the intentions of Aristotle, rather than offering a detailed commentary[^84]. Averroes substituted the terminology and the verses of the Arabic poetry he knew for the terms and verses of the Greek poetry which were unclear to him[^85]. And Abū l-Barakāt al-Baṣrī, a Jewish convert to Islam, assumed that the difference between Greek and Arabic poetry could be explained in the same way as the difference between the latter and Biblical poetry[^86].

Avicenna was the first Arab philosopher whose work on the Poetics is a commentary in the strict sense of the word[^84]. That Avicenna was conscious of the difference between Arabic and Greek poetry is clear from several remarks in his commentary on Aristotle's Poetics[^85]. It is also clear that he was uneasy with the need to comment on a work which is based on the unfamiliar Greek poetry, and his apologetic tone is obvious when he says:

"We shall now turn to record as much of the First Teaching (i.e., the Aristotelian text) as we have been able to understand. For what it contains relates mostly to poems and descriptions which were peculiar to them (i.e., to Greeks)."[^84]

Unlike Averroes, Avicenna rarely resorted to substituting Arabic poetic constructions for the Greek ones[^86]. I suggest that...

[^58]: *Kātibī* *al-fusrār wa-l-ṭarrīfān*, Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, Al-fusrār wa-l-ṭarrīfān, ed. A. Amin and A. Al-Zayn, 1, p. 123. 2 may also be an allusion to the philosophers' awkward situation as regards the Poetics.


[^62]: Fārūq *al-taṣlīl wa-l-ṭarrīfān*, Badawi, pp. 167-197; and see Heinrichs, p. 155.

[^63]: Badawi, p. 167; Daiyāt, p. 17.

[^64]: Badawi, p. 167.

Avicenna’s discomfort in this awkward situation is not only reflected in his commentary of Aristotle. It also influenced his own creative writings, foremost among which are the stories. I think it can be shown that in writing his stories Avicenna applied principles derived from the Poetics, and that he aimed at a literary form that would have the effect of the literature described by Aristotle.

III.2 Qissa and the Poetics

According to Aristotle, «Epic poetry and Tragedy, as also Comedy, Dithyrambic poetry, and most flute playing and lyre-playing, are all, viewed as a whole, modes of imitation»68. Imitation (mimesis) is the characteristic technique of poetry. Among the various kinds of poetry, the one most relevant to our study is tragedy.

For Aristotle

Tragedy ... is the imitation (mimesis) of an action that is serious, complete, and of certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament ... in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation (catharsis) of these emotions69.

Aristotle lists six components of tragedy which together contribute to the achievement of this «catharsis». The six components are not all equally important.

The most important of all is the structure of the incidents ... hence the incidents and the Plot (mythos) that are the end of the tragedy; ... The Plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of the tragedy70.

And again:

let us now discuss the proper structure of the Plot, since this is the most important thing in Tragedy71.

It is precisely this essential feature—the plot, the drama («form of action»)—that captured Avicenna’s attention. The plot (qissa or ḥurāfa in the translation used by Avicenna72) is one of the com-

ponents essential in producing mimesis. For the Arab philosophers ḥurāfa was usually a pejorative term: Plato’s «old wives tales» became for the Arab Aristotelians a standard expression of scorn73. But in the translation of the Poetics used by Avicenna the word ḥurāfa is used in the same sense as qissa and refers to an element that the poet must include in his work in order to achieve the desired effect of poetry.

The plot or the story of the poetic composition is essential for the role of poetry in activating the imagination. According to Avicenna, «the logician is interested in poetry only in so far as it activates the imagination»74, and it is the imagination which produces the effect of mimesis. Speaking of the mimetic effect of poetry, Avicenna says:

People respond to imagination (taqdī) more easily than to verification (tadqīq) ... because truth that is already known is like old merchandise, which has no freshness to it, and one cannot relate to truth that is as yet unknown. So if a true saying is phrased in an unusual way, and is associated with something that is agreeable to the soul, then it may impart both verification and imagination75.

Avicenna speaks here of «people» (al-nās), which could be taken to mean the common people. If this were the case, Avicenna’s attitude to poetry would agree both with the Aristotelian (i.e. Platonic) attitude to mythical discourse and with the falsāfa’s attitude to poetry. But Avicenna also speaks here of «verification» (taqdīq) and imagination (taqdī) as interchangeable means to the same end. In other words, alongside the demonstrative way, Avicenna offers


70 See Plato, Politi, III, 376-379. And see, for example, the evaluation of the belief in the hereafter as ḥurāfa al-qalālib, attributed to Al-Fārâbî in Ibn Ṭufayl, p. 112; Avicenna, Ikhān, p. 92 (A. Lerner and Mahdi, p. 113); and also Abu ʿAlî in a passage of his commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics, quoted in Pseudo-Mabûdi’s Gâyât al-ḥikâm, ed. H. Ritter (Leipzig and Berlin, 1923), p. 383. Fines («A Tenths Philosophical correspondence», Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research 24, 1955, p. 119, n. 71) explains the word ḥurāfa in this last passage as «stories which are untrue and absurd».

71 Badawi, p. 167.

72 Badawi, p. 162.

73 On this key term in Aristotelian epistemology, see H. A. Wolfson, «The Terms Tadqiq and Tarâzîn in Arabic Philosophy and their Greek, Latin and Hebrew Equivalents», MW 5 (1933), pp. 144 fl.
a complementary way of learning, a way which is valid also for the philosopher.

That the philosopher may sometimes benefit from artistic, non-demonstrative method was admitted even by the strictest fīlāsīfa. Paradoxically, this admission can be clearly seen in Maimonides' rejection of such artistic activities, where he says:

All songs and rhythmical compositions are forbidden... We must not think of the exceptional individual, so rarely found, in whom such things may cause concentration and quick affection (that may help him) to grasp the intelligibles... for religious laws take into consideration only that which is found in the majority of cases'.

Maimonides considers songs and music as harmful for the multitude, but even he does not deny that they may have a beneficial effect on the intellectual activity of the elite.

Avicenna, on the other hand, considered the use of artistic methods as legitimate for the elite, and in this he believed himself to be following Aristotle faithfully. In the process of bringing about the desired beneficial effect the poetic plot has a major role for Avicenna. He does not regard the qīṣa as just a lengthy majal or allegory. Like the plot in the Philosopher's view of the Greek tragedies, the qīṣa is meant to lead the listener along a way that in theory is familiar to him, but that in practice may be hard to follow when guided by reflection alone.

III.3 Avicenna's qīṣa

Following Aristotle, Avicenna makes it quite clear that for him the qīṣa, philosophy and poetry are closely linked. But one may ask: how do we know that in writing his own qīṣā Avicenna envisaged the same qīṣa that he describes in the commentary to Aristotle's Poetics? Avicenna never calls his qīṣā «poetry» (išī'; he could not have done so, since the term was reserved in Arabic for another well established genre. Nor does he ever point to a connection between his stories and Aristotle's Poetics; he could not claim that his stories correspond exactly to the kind of literature described by Aristotle, because in the Poetics the plot (qīṣa) is only one of several components that make up poetry. Avicenna separated this component and developed it in a way that was his own, not Aristotle's.

Nevertheless, it can be shown that in Avicenna's mind the Poetics was associated with «stories», and that while writing his commentary on Aristotle's Poetics, he was thinking of «stories» as a separate genre.

The fact that he does so is evident from an analysis of Avicenna's attempts to distinguish between poetry and poetry-like writings. Poetry for Avicenna is characterized by the combination of its form (i.e., it rhymes and has meter), its contents (things which really are, not imaginary reality) and its role (to allow the reader to experience truths which he may be slow to experience or incapable of experiencing if they are presented in an apodictic way). Poetry-like writings have some poetic features, but since their content is not poetic, they fall short of being poetry. This distinction is already to be found in Aristotle, who says:

... it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with meter no less than without it. The true difference is that one related what has happened, the other what may happen'.

Avicenna took the things that «are possible according the law of necessity» to be what relates to the world of intelligibles rather than to the world of phenomena. This is the subject matter of poetry, whereas poetry-like writings tell of things past. As an example of poetry-like writing we might have expected Avicenna to substitute for the work of Herodotus some Arabic work of history'. We might also have expected him, when he discusses things that look like poetry, to offer as examples some Arabic verse that does not aim at such lofty experiences as the poetry described by Aristotle. But instead of choosing something from the rich historical and poetical literature of the Arabs, Avicenna refers to Kalīla wa-Dimna. This, he says, is not poetry, and would not become poetry even if put into verse. His complex discussion of this point, which is of capital importance for our argument, deserves to be quoted at length.

Know that the kind of imitation which appears in parables and stories (al-āmmāt wa-latī'īqīṣā') does not belong to poetry in any way.

78 Poetics IX, 1-3, 1451a 36-1451b 5.
79 See note 80 below.
80 Dahiyat, p. 9, reads qās and translates accordingly: «historical narratives». His understandings is perhaps influenced by the example of Herodotus in Aristotle's text. But here as throughout Avicenna's commentary of the Poetics, the
II.2. Goichon’s Interpretation

The approach of Avicenna’s disciples was adopted in modern times by Goichon, who explained the text of Hayy ibn Yaqzan on the basis of the commentaries of Avicenna’s disciples and of his own philosophy. She regards Avicenna’s stories as philosophical parables, intended to transmit the philosophical truth, or as riddles that await their deciphering. But she does not provide a serious explanation for Avicenna’s predilection for the use of parables or of riddles. For Goichon, qiṣaṣ can be rendered in French as a “récit”, provided that we “understand it in the simple sense.” In other words, the story is only a literary form, and as such it has no philosophical role. Its philosophical content can be—and in fact has been—conveyed just as well in other literary forms.

II.3. Gutas’s Interpretation

Goichon’s assumption was lately taken up and developed by Gutas, who regards Avicenna’s stories as an example of the use of the symbolic method by the philosophers. In order to understand Gutas’s view, we must first briefly describe the main characteristics of this use.

II.4. The Symbolic Method as Used by the Philosophers

The falāṣīfa (i.e., Medieval Aristotelian philosophers) regarded the use of fables, enigmas, allegories and myths as a vital need of philosophy in human societies. “In the opinion of these medieval thinkers, the mythical mode of expression, when used by a philosopher, constituted a deliberate concealment of theoretical truth.” Sometimes, when used by the falāṣīfa themselves, this deliberate concealment was dictated by expediency: if non-philosophers are prematurely exposed to philosophical truth, they may regard it as a shocking heresy. Equivocal speech was thus meant to protect the philosopher from the accusation of holding heretical views. Perhaps even more important is the fact that the mythical mode of expres-

34 Goichon, especially, pp. 9 and 15-17.
35 Goichon, p. 15
36 Gutas, “Philosophic Sources”, p. LXXV.
39 Gutas, p. 302.
effort in the attempt to discover «the secret of the Guide», and they wrote about their findings. But they often disagree in their interpretation; and even the most outspoken of them themselves use ambiguous language, or apologize profusely for disregarding Maimonides’ demand that the truth be kept secret. If we return now to Avicenna’s stories, we may note (a) that the fact that Avicenna calls attention to the parabolic nature of *The Story of Salzam* and *Abal* shows that this story (and presumably also the other stories) is not intended for the vulgar. As noted above, the Platonic view of mythical discourse does not allow the masses to know that something is being hidden from them. And indeed, Avicenna tells us that the audience for which this story is intended are those who can hope for the rank of divine knowledge. b) The remarkable agreement of the commentaries raises serious questions concerning Avicenna’s talent as a riddle-teller: if he intended the stories to be veiled discourses, he did not succeed very well. And c) if the master intended his discourse to be veiled, his students seem to have had surprisingly little respect for his intentions, for they disclose the meaning of the stories in a plain, matter-of-fact manner, without any scruples.

Maimonides’ *Guide* and its commentaries fit the description presented above of «mythical discourse» as used by Aristotelian philosophers. The commentaries on Avicenna enable us to realize that his stories do not fit this description. The stories do not hide anything, nor do they disclose a secret, unknown teaching. They repeat a teaching which, at a certain philosophical level, is well-known.

II.5 Corbin’s Interpretation

The shortcomings of the commentator’s approach were noted already by Corbin, and in his masterly study of the stories he endeavoured to avoid these shortcomings. Like the other commen-

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50 See, for instance, *Dati* al-Hā’irān, introduction, p. 9.21-25 (as *Guide*, p. 14): «In some matters it will suffice you to gather from my remarks that a given story is a parable, even if we explain nothing more; for once you know it is a parable, it will immediately become clear to you what it is a parable of. My remarking that it is a parable will be like someone’s removing a screen from between the eye and a visible thing.»
52 *Habibat*, II, 443 (French translation in Anawari, II, p. 177).
tators, Corbin’s point of departure in his interpretation is Avicenna’s own philosophy, and he assumes that the details of the stories are metaphors that need to be interpreted. But he also assumes that the story as a whole has a specific philosophical meaning. Avicenna designates the stories as qisas, a word the root of which is qas. A verb with the same root means, among other things, “to follow in the footsteps of somebody.” For Corbin, the choice of this term is of capital importance. According to him, the qisas is indeed a “re-cital,” in which the reader is called upon to situate himself in the place of the hero and re-live his experiences.

While avoiding the difficulties we noted above in the disciples’ commentaries, Corbin’s approach is problematic in other ways. It is not only that, in his enthusiasm for the spiritual understanding, Corbin is sometimes carried away to the point of rewriting the Avicennian text, but also that his interpretation of the stories as a whole comprises a major difficulty. Corbin seeks to find in the stories a spiritual Avicenna, different from Avicenna the logician and Avicenna the Peripatetic philosopher. According to Corbin, it is the Spiritual Avicenna who wrote the “recitals.” Consequently Corbin sees no essential difference between Avicenna’s stories and those written by Suhrawardi, Sayy al-Ibrāq. One could almost say that Corbin reads Avicenna’s stories as a commentary on Suhrawardi’s. But, as noted above, Suhrawardi himself did not share this view, for he believed that Avicenna’s stories needed some rewriting.

The differences between the stories written by Avicenna and those written, on the one hand, by al-Ma‘ārif thinkers such as Suhrawardi, and on the other hand, by such philosophers as Ibn Tufayl, cannot be ignored. Indeed, Avicenna is not only the first, but also the only Aristotelian philosopher to devote such a sustained effort to the writing of philosophical stories. In order better to understand the peculiarity of Avicenna’s stories, we must now turn to another literary genre in the use of which Avicenna is somewhat unusual.

III. Avicenna’s poetry and the Poetics

Among the Aristotelian philosophers, Avicenna’s attitude to poetry is as peculiar as the importance he gives to stories. Al-Farābī and Averroes saw poetry as a means of education to be used only in the most limited fashion. A Jewish philosopher like Maimonides, who had no attachment to the Arab poetical tradition, felt free to express his disdain for poetry in a more pronounced way. Muslim philosophers had to accept poetry, because it was part of their culture and could hardly be avoided. But they did so with reluctance, and it is hard to imagine al-Farābī, Ibn Bāgga or Averroes writing true poetry.

46 Corbin, p. 42: “Les symboles de nos Récits n’ont pas tout à fait la même fonction que le mythe platonicien. La réduction du même au même est l’œuvre pour-suitie en général par les commentaires très rationalistes de ces Récits, mais elles est inutile à la transmission dont la conséquence est qu’au lieu de chercher un secret dans ou sous le texte, il faut considérer ce texte lui-même comme le secret...”

47 Corbin, p. 43: “Ce n’est pas une histoire arrivee à d’autres, mais la sienne propre, son propre «roman spirituel», si l’on veut, mais personnalisément vécu... C’est pourquoi nous n’avons retenu les désignations ni d’allégories mystiques, ni d’histoires ou contes philosophiques, mais celle de Récit, et de Récits visionnaires ou Récits d’initiations. See also Levin, «Gazelles», pp. 382-383.

48 By way of an example we may mention Avicenna’s description of the “let-down experience” which inevitably follows the illumination. Avicenna says that those who have seen the King, return reluctantly (suha-man makhari; Amin, p. 53; Mere, p. 21), which Corbin renders as “semblable de dons mystiques” (Corbin, p. 165).

49 Gutas pertinentely describes this search as Corbin’s “obsession with what he perceived to be the allegedly ineffable Iranian spirituality.” (Gutas, p. 299, n. 2).

50 In fact, Corbin’s initial and main interest was in the stories of Suhrawardi, and his purpose in his study of Avicenna’s stories was to see “quelle part d’inspiration avicennienne recélait, voire attestait explicitement, le cycle des Récits suhrawardiens.” (Corbin, p. 14.)
But Avicenna did. His *Ode of the Soul* is, in many respects, a miniature version of the *Epistle of the Bird*. It recounts the fall of the soul, its longing to return to its heavenly abode, and its return. This gnostic myth is presented in rhymed hemistichs, and is labeled "a qasida." Avicenna's stories are not *qasida* id, and are never so described. Yet they too are clearly poetic creations. Unlike the *Ode*, the stories are not classical poems. But they are also not didactic compositions, like Avicenna's *Poem on Medicine*. To what poetic genre do the *qasida* belong?

III11. The Falāṣifa and the Poetics

The clue to this puzzle may be found in Avicenna's commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*. The *Poetics* was translated along with the other books of Aristotle, and, following the Alexandrian Commentators, was considered to be part of the *Organon*. As such, it attracted the same serious attention that the *falāṣifa* accorded to Aristotle's works on logic. But since the translation movement did not include belles lettres, the *falāṣifa* were not familiar with the kind of literature dealt with in the *Poetics*. They read about tragedies, comedies and dramas without ever having read anything of Aeschylus or of Homer. The meaning of the *Poetics* therefore remained a mystery to them.

The Arab philosophers were to some extent aware of the fact that they lacked the tools to understand the *Poetics*, and they even admitted it. But they refused to exclude it from their teaching. Having to explain what they did not understand, they turned to what they did know. Al-Fārābī circumvented the difficulty by summing up the intentions of Aristotle, rather than offering a detailed commentary. Averroes substituted the terminology and the verses of the Arabic poetry he knew for the terms and verses of the Greek poetry which were unclear to him. And Abū l-Barakāt al-Baghdādi, a Jewish convert to Islam, assumed that the difference between Greek and Arabic poetry could be explained in the same way as the difference between the latter and Biblical poetry.

Avicenna was the first Arab philosopher whose work on the *Poetics* is a commentary in the strict sense of the word. That Avicenna was conscious of the difference between Arabic and Greek poetry is clear from several remarks in his commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*. It is also clear that he was uneasy with the need to comment on a work which is based on the unfamiliar Greek poetry, and his apologetic tone is obvious when he says:

"We shall now turn to record as much of the First Teaching (i.e., the Aristotelian text) as we have been able to understand. For what it contains relates mostly to poems and descriptions which were peculiar to them (i.e., to Greeks)."

Unlike Averroes, Avicenna rarely resorted to substituting Arabic poetical constructions for the Greek ones. I suggest that

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59 The similarity was noted by Grochon, p. 15.
60 As noted by Grochon, p. 15, and see also above, note 3. On the other hand, see Henri Jahn and Abdellâher Noureddine, *Dictionnaire de l'arabe littéraire* (Algiers, 1960), pp. 10, 15, according to whom "in the *falāṣifa* poetry has only a limited role.
62 *Gardet, *Humanisme*,* p. 815; G. Wiet, *Les traducteurs arabes de la poésie grecque*, *Mélanges René Grousset* II (Les *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 3, 1962), pp. 361-568; J. Kramer, *Arabische Homerverse*, *ZDMG* 106 (1956), pp. 259; Ḥusayn ibn Ishāq was an exception to the rule, in that he seems to have read some Homer (G. Strohmaier, *Homer in Baghdad*, *Byzantinistika* 41, 1980, pp. 196-209). But the scope of his knowledge in this domain seems to have been rather limited. Note the marked discrepancy between his ability to reconstruct the medical works of Galen and his bewildering concern about a technical word by Aristophanes (M. Meyerhof, *La version arabe d'un Traité perdu de Galien*, *Byzantion* 3, 1926, pp. 413-442, especially pp. 433-435).
63 As noted, for example, Dahiyyat, p. 28, and A. Traboulsi, *La critique poétique des Arabes* (Damascus, 1956), pp. 74-76. Al-Sirāfī's criticism of the philosophers...
Avicenna’s discomfort in this awkward situation is not only reflected in his commentary of Aristotle. It also influenced his own creative writings, foremost among which are the stories. I think it can be shown that in writing his stories Avicenna applied principles derived from the Poetics, and that he aimed at a literary form that would have the effect of the literature described by Aristotle.

III.2 Qisṣa and the Poetics

According to Aristotle, «Epic poetry and Tragedy, as also Comedy, Dithyrambic poetry, and most flute playing and lyre-playing, are all, viewed as a whole, modes of imitations»⁴⁶. Imitation (mimesis) is the characteristic technique of poetry. Among the various kinds of poetry, the one most relevant to our study is tragedy. For Aristotle

Tragedy ... is the imitation (mimesis) of an action that is serious, complete, and of certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament ... in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purification (katharsis) of these emotions⁴⁷.

Aristotle lists six components of tragedy which together contribute to the achievement of this «katharsis». The six components are not all equally important.

The most important of all is the structure of the incidents ... hence the incidents and the Plot (mythos) that are the end of the tragedy; ... The Plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of the tragedy⁴⁸.

And again:

let us now discuss the proper structure of the Plot, since this is the most important thing in Tragedy⁴⁹.

It is precisely this essential feature—the plot, the drama («form of action»)—that captured Avicenna’s attention. The plot (qisṣa or harṣa in the translation used by Avicenna⁵⁰) is one of the components essential in producing mimesis. For the Arab philosophers harṣa was usually a pejorative term: Plato’s «old wives tales» became for the Arab Aristotelians a standard expression of scorn⁵¹. But in the translation of the Poetics used by Avicenna the word harṣa is used in the same sense as qisṣa and refers to an element that the poet must include in his work in order to achieve the desired effect of poetry.

The plot or the story of the poetic composition is essential for the role of poetry in activating the imagination. According to Avicenna, «the logician is interested in poetry only in so far as it activates the imagination»⁵², and it is the imagination which produces the effect of mimesis. Speaking of the mimetic effect of poetry, Avicenna says:

People respond to imagination (ṭabīḥ) more easily than to verification (taṣdiq) ... because truth that is already known is like old merchandise, which has no freshness to it; and one cannot relate to truth that is as yet unknown. So if a true saying is phrased in an unusual way, and is associated with something that is agreeable to the soul, then it may impart both verification and imagination⁵³.

Avicenna speaks here of «people» (al-nās), which could be taken to mean the common people. If this were the case, Avicenna’s attitude to poetry would agree both with the Aristotelian (i.e. Platonic) attitude to mythical discourse and with the faḍlāt’s attitude to poetry. But Avicenna also speaks here of «verification» (taṣdiq)⁵⁴ and imagination (ṭabīḥ) as interchangeable means to the same end. In other words, alongside the demonstrative way, Avicenna offers

⁴⁶ Poetics 1447 b 15.
⁴⁷ Poetics, VI, 2-5, 1449 b 25-30.
⁴⁹ Poetics, VII, 1, 1450 b 22.
⁵⁰ Avicenna probably used the version prepared by Yabūṣ ibn ‘Abbā. It is unclear whether this version was a new translation (F. E. Peters, Aristotelian Anaxus, Leiden, 1968, pp. 23-28; Duhaylī, p. 7) or only a corrected version of Abū Bīr Mattā’s translation (Heinrichs, p. 156). On the translation(s) of the Poetics into Arabic, see Badawi, pp. 7-9, Heinrichs, pp. 105-127, and also D. Margoliouth.
⁵¹ See Plato, Poetics, II, 376-379. And see, for example, the evaluation of the belief in the hereafter as harṣa ‘al-‘afāʾil, attributed to al-Fārābī in Ibn Ṭuḥayfī, p. 112; Avicenna, Ibād, p. 62 (= Lerner and Mahdi, p. 113); and also Abū Bīr in a passage of his commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics, quoted in Pseudo-Maqrīzī’s Gāyūt al-ḥāqīqah, ed. H. Ritter (Leipzig and Berlin, 1933), p. 283. Pines («A Tenth Century Philosophical correspondence», Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research 24, 1955, p. 119, n. 71) explains the word harṣa in this last passage as «stories which are untraceable and absurd».
⁵² Badawi, p. 167.
⁵³ Badawi, p. 162.
⁵⁴ On this key term in Aristotelian epistemology, see H. A. Wolfson, «The Terms Taṣdiq and Taṣawwur in Arabic Philosophy and their Greek, Latin and Hebrew Equivalents», AM 5 (1933), pp. 144 ff.
a complementary way of learning, a way which is valid also for the philosopher.

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III.3 Avicenna’s qisā

Following Aristotle, Avicenna makes it quite clear that for him the qisā, philosophy and poetry are closely linked. But one may ask: how do we know that in writing his own qisās Avicenna envisaged the same qisā that he describes in the commentary to Aristotle’s Poetics? Avicenna never calls his qisās ‘poetry’ (sīr); he cannot have done so, since the term was reserved in Arabic for another well established genre. Nor does he ever point to a connection between his stories and Aristotle’s Poetics; he could not claim that his stories correspond exactly to the kind of literature described by Aristotle, because in the Poetics the plot (qisā) is only one of several components that make up poetry. Avicenna separated this component and developed it in a way that was his own, not Aristotle’s.

Nevertheless, it can be shown that in Avicenna’s mind the Poetics was associated with ‘stories’, and that while writing his commentary on Aristotle’s Poetics, he was thinking of ‘stories’ as a separate genre.

The fact that he does so is evident from an analysis of Avicenna’s attempts to distinguish between poetry and poetry-like writings. Poetry for Avicenna is characterized by the combination of its form (i.e., it rhymes and has meter), its contents (things which really are, not imaginary reality) and its role (to allow the reader to experience truths which he may be slow to experience or incapable of experiencing if they are presented in an apodictic way). Poetry-like writings have some poetic features, but since their content is not poetic, they fall short of being poetry. This distinction is already to be found in Aristotle, who says:

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Avicenna took the things that are possible according to the law of necessity to be what relates to the world of intelligibles rather than to the world of phenomena. This is the subject matter of poetry, whereas poetry-like writings tell of things past. As an example of poetry-like writing we might have expected Avicenna to substitute for the work of Herodotus some Arabic work of history. We might also have expected him, when he discusses things that look like poetry, to offer as examples some Arabic verse that does not aim at such lofty experiences as the poetry described by Aristotle. But instead of choosing something from the rich historical and poetical literature of the Arabs, Avicenna refers to Kalila wa-Dinna. This, he says, is not poetry, and would not become poetry even if put into verse. His complex discussion of this point, which is of capital importance for our argument, deserves to be quoted at length.

Know that the kind of imitation which appears in parables and stories (al-anfâl wa-l-qisā) does not belong to poetry in any way.

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38 Poetics, IX, 1-3, 1451a 36-1451b 5.

39 See note 80 below.

40 Dāhîyat, p. 9, reads qisā and translates accordingly: ‘historical narratives’. His understandings is perhaps influenced by the example of Herodotus in Aristotle’s text. But here as throughout Avicenna’s commentary of the Poetics, the
of poetry is only to activate the imagination, not to impart opinions. If a work is in prose, it is less effective in activating the imagination than if it is in verse. The purpose of stories is to impart knowledge of the results of experience, and to do this one does not really need verse. So one of our two [genres, i.e., poetry] discusses that which existed and will exist, whereas the other (i.e., stories) discusses that whose existence is in speech alone. Poetry is therefore more like philosophy than the other genre, for it captures the existential better than the other genre and is closer to it to universal judgment."

In this passage, Avicenna's basic concern is to make the distinction between poetry and non-poetry. He knows that it will be natural for his reader to assume that all verse is poetry, and that before going any further he must explain that this is not so. Now the obvious way of doing this would be to take as an example Arabic qaṣīdah or the like, and to explain why they are only verse, not true poetry in the Aristotelian sense. But Avicenna does not do this: he starts by writing about stories, and only makes the verse/poetry distinction by asking the reader to imagine that the story has been versified.

The most obvious way to explain why Avicenna drags stories into an exposition in which they do not naturally appear is that he connects stories (qiṣaṣ or ḥarīfah) in a special way with the poetry/non-poetry distinction, and this in turn can only be because of the realization, which was so important for him, of the crucial role of the plot (qiṣaṣ or ḥarīfah) in the poetry described by Aristotle.

In later discussions of poetry in Arabic the reference to Kalila wa-Dimna was used as a matter of course, often without understanding the original Avicennian role of this example. Al-Qaraqānī (d. 1283) even mentions it as the kind of fable which was typical of Greek poetry. Avicenna was the first to introduce this example into the discussion, and it makes sense only in the context of his understanding of the poetic and philosophic role of qiṣaṣ.

Avicenna's unexpected reference to—and rejection of—Kalila wa-Dimna—suggests that while commenting on the Poetics, Avicenna was reflecting on qiṣas (stories) which, unlike the Indian

synonym of nāsīt and of ḥarīfah in qiṣaṣ. Pl. qiṣas. Kalila wa-Dimna, which appears in the following lines, can hardly be characterized as a historical account, despite its 'historical anecdotes' referred to by Dāhiyāt (p. 99, n. 3).

87 literally: "If the difference ... were only in metre (qasīm).

88 This sentence seems to suggest that Avicenna thought that Herodotus wrote in verse.

89 Avicenna appears to have become a bit muddled in his attempt to explain Aristotle's text by substituting the familiar Kalila wa-Dimna [which is in prose] for the unfamiliar example given by Aristotle (presumably Herodotus), which Avicenna has just described as written in verse.

90 Literally: "the results and the acquired experience" (naṣīt 'al-tafrīšah), but compare two lines below: naṣīt 'al-tafrīšah.
fables, do meet the Aristotelian criteria. And as such stories did not exist in Arabic literature, Avicenna had to write them himself.

As required by Aristotle, Avicenna's stories are "complete in themselves." Their language is enjoyable, and they describe a sequence of events. These events are not in narrative but in a dramatic form (although Avicenna's understanding of drama is closer to rhetoric\textsuperscript{92}). The Story of Salāmān and Abī Sālīh and The Epistle of the Bird record incidents which arouse pity and fear. And most important of all, the plots of the stories are not records of past events. Rather, the plots of all three stories describe the way to the Knowledge of Necessary Things, the intelligibles.

The chronology of Avicenna's writings is also significant. As noted above\textsuperscript{96}, he wrote his stories while being held a prisoner in Parāfnān. At about this time he was in the middle of the lengthy process of writing the Sīfā, and it seems that he had already finished his commentary on Aristotle's Poetics, or at least that this commentary was written at very much the same time\textsuperscript{96}.

Conclusion

It is now easier to understand Avicenna's insistence on the use of the stories, his repeated attempts to tackle his "newly discovered" genre, and his own reference to his qīṣa. It is also easier to estimate the uniqueness of Avicenna's stories. Unlike the Ishaqīs before him, or Ibn Tufayl and Sahrawardi after him, Avicenna intended his stories to be what we may call Aristotelian dramaturgy.

A reading of Avicenna's commentary on the Poetics corroborates Corbin's intuition about the importance that should be ascribed to the word qīṣa. In fact, Corbin came very close to understanding the exact meaning of the qīṣa. He realized that the recitāl had a mimetic role\textsuperscript{97}, but since he was not prepared to see it in Peripatetic terms, he remained unaware of the precise dramatic context of the qīṣa. Corbin's intuition was correct insofar as for Avicenna the genre was inherently connected to its purpose. But for Avicenna the story was not a "visionary recital", and did not belong to a mystic, theosophic, pre-Islāmī genre. For Avicenna, the story was soundly grounded in the Aristotelian tradition as he understood it.

Abbreviations of frequently quoted works

- Amin - Ahmad Amin, Ḥāy b. Yaṣān b. Ǧaḥrawān (Miṣr, 1952).
- Dabīyat - I. M. Dabīyat, Avicenna's Commentary on the Poetics of Aristotle (Leiden, 1974).
- Gardet, Avicenne (L. Gardet, La pensée religieuse d'Avicenne (Ibn Sīnā), (Paris, 1951).
- Ibn Erāz - Ḥāy b. Ṭalqīb b. Ǧaḥrawān Ibn Erāz, ed. I. Levin (Tel Aviv, 1983).
- Pines, "Philosophic Sources", "The Philosophic Sources of the Guide of the
