

# AVICENNA'S PHILOSOPHICAL STORIES: ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS* REINTERPRETED<sup>1</sup>

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For Lucy and Sari Nuseibeh

AMONG Avicenna's many works, his stories (*qisās*) 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<sup>2</sup> or profound spiritual *gnosis*<sup>3</sup>? 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 Farağān.<sup>4</sup> 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».<sup>5</sup> Henri Corbin alone

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> «Un résumé de la doctrine avicennienne de la connaissance», Goichon, *Hayy*, p. 15; «The knowledge of the Aristotelian tradition as integrated, systematized and presented by Avicenna», Gutas, p. 311. On the degree of agreement between Avicenna's rational and his mystical/poetic writings, see also S. Nuseibeh, «*Al-'aql al-Qudsī*: Avicenna's Subjective Theory of Knowledge», *SI* LXIX (1989), p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> Corbin, p. 23. See also Gardet, «humanisme», p. 825.

<sup>4</sup> «Un jeu poétique et profond occupant ses loisirs forcés», Goichon, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Gutas, p. 306.

granted the style of the stories profound philosophical significance, regarding them as «visionary recitals».<sup>6</sup>

In the following pages I shall first discuss Avicenna's stories, their literary background and the use of stories by Muslim thinkers after Avicenna. I shall attempt to demonstrate that in this realm Avicenna was innovative and remained unique. I shall then examine the various scholarly attempts to interpret Avicenna's stories. It is my intention to show that these stories do not fit the symbolic method normally used by the Aristotelian philosophers, but that the stories, style and all, must nevertheless be understood against the background of Avicenna's reading of Aristotelian philosophy.

### I. Avicenna's Stories

Avicenna wrote three stories:

a) *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* 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.<sup>7</sup>

b) *The Story of Salāmān and Absāl* (the original Avicennian version of which is lost, and which is known to us only through Tūsī's Persian commentary)<sup>8</sup> tells of King Salāmān and his beloved brother Absāl. Salāmān's lustful wife schemes to gain the favours of Absāl. Absāl'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*<sup>9</sup> 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<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Corbin, especially p. 43. Corbin was translated into English by Willard R. Trask (*Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, London, 1960).

<sup>7</sup> Mehren, pp. 1-22; Amin, pp. 43-53.

<sup>8</sup> Gutas, p. 305, n. 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Risālat al-Ṭayr*, Mehren, pp. 42-48.

<sup>10</sup> Malachi (p. 317) and Levine (p. 584) correctly point out that, in contrast to Ibn Ezra's Hebrew version of *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* or to the Hebrew version of *The*

### 1.1 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 Salāmān and Absāl* was translated from Greek by Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq<sup>11</sup>. 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 plot<sup>12</sup>.

After the Arab conquests in the East, the Indians and Persians introduced the Arabs to animal tales, among them *Kalīla wa-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*<sup>13</sup>. Unlike *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, this epistle does not offer moral or practical advice to the ruler, but rather a philosophico-theological message: The animate world is hierarchical, 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'īliyya*, although the precise nature of the connection is still debated by scholars<sup>14</sup>. In any case, it seems that the Isma'īlīs favoured the use of such allegories, and in the Isma'īlī *Kitāb al-ḡulām wal-muta'allim* the allegory develops into a full-fledged initiation story<sup>15</sup>.

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

*Epistle of the Bird*, Avicenna's stories are not in rhymed prose. But it is nevertheless evident that Avicenna's stories are written in a rather sophisticated poetic prose.

<sup>11</sup> *Qisṣat Salāmān wa-Absāl, tarḡamat Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq min al-Yunānīyya*, in *Tis' Rasā'il*, ed. Amin Hindih (Cairo, 1908); see Corbin, p. 229.

<sup>12</sup> See P.-H. Poirier, *L'hymne de la Perle des Actes de Thomas* (Louvain-La-Neuve, 1981).

<sup>13</sup> *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-Safā wa-Ḥillān al-Wafā* (Egypt, 1928), II, pp. 173-198; Fr. Dietrich, *Thier und Mensch vor dem König der Genien* (Leipzig, 1881). See also the medieval Hebrew translation by Qalonimos ben Qalonimos, *Iggeret ba'alei ha-hayim*, ed. Toporovski (Jerusalem, 1956).

<sup>14</sup> See S. M. Stern, «New information about the authors of the Epistles of the Sincere Brethren», *Islamic Studies*, 4 (1964), III, pp. 405-428, repr. *Studies in Early Isma'īlism* (Jerusalem, 1983), pp. 155-176; Y. Marquet, *La philosophie des Iḥwān al-Safā* (Algiers, 1973), p. 585 et passim.

<sup>15</sup> See Hermann Landoldt, «Suhrawardī's 'Tales of Initiation'», *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 107 (1987), p. 482.

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<sup>16</sup>, or as an exercise for students<sup>17</sup>, 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 are his references to them in his other works<sup>18</sup>.

### 1.2 Later Philosophical stories

After Avicenna the genre spreads and becomes quite popular. Avicenna's stories were translated into Hebrew<sup>19</sup>, 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-Ġazālī (d. 1111)<sup>20</sup>, a *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* written by Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185)<sup>21</sup> and another one written by Šihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191), who also wrote an *Epistle of the Bird* and some other allegorical stories<sup>22</sup>, and a story by Ibn al-Nafīs (d. 1269) entitled *al-Risāla al-kāmiliyya fī l-sīra l-nabawiyya*<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Goichon, note 4 above.

<sup>17</sup> Gutas, p. 305.

<sup>18</sup> See the *Risālat al-Qadar*, Mehren, pp. 5-6; *Isārāt*, p. 188-189.

<sup>19</sup> The most famous adaptation is that of Abraham Ibn Ezra, the *Igeret Ḥay ben Meqitz*, ed. Y. Levin (Tel Aviv, 1983). Other translators took more liberty; see Z. Langermann, 'From the Treasures of the Institute of Hebrew Manuscripts at the National and University Library in Jerusalem: No. 42: David ben Shlomo ben 'Aqush's Epistle of 'Alīm ben Ṭalīb', *Qiryat Sefer* 60 (1985), pp. 326-327 (in Hebrew). For the Hebrew translations and adaptations of the *Epistle of the Bird*, see Malachi, pp. 325-341 (in Hebrew), and Levin. It is possible that Maimonides's *Guide I 58* (*Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn* 93;23-26) are an echo of the last lines of Avicenna's *Ḥayy*.

<sup>20</sup> *Risālat al-Ṭayr li-l-Ġazālī* in *Maḡmū'at Rasā'il*, ed. Muḥyī l-Dīn al-Kānīmāškānī (Miṣr, 1328 H.), pp. 535-544.

<sup>21</sup> Ibn Ṭufayl, and see the English translation of L. E. Goodman, *Ibn Ṭufayl's Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* (New York, 1972). *Guide II 17* (*Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn* 205:20-206:15) is probably Maimonides' retort to Ibn Ṭufayl's parable.

<sup>22</sup> *Al-Ġurba al-Ġarbiyya*, Amin, pp. 135-138; Suhrawardī, II, pp. 273ff; *Risālat al-Ṭayr*, Suhrawardī, pp. 62-71.

<sup>23</sup> *The Theologus Autodidactus of Ibn al-Nafīs*, ed. and trans. M. Meyerhof and J. Schacht (Oxford, 1968). It is difficult to share Schacht's view that this book is

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 *Ḥayy* but also from *Salāmān wa-Absāl*<sup>24</sup>, while the story of Suhrawardī *Maqtūl*, entitled *The Western Exile*, draws on both *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* and *The Epistle of the Bird*. But the influence is not limited to the literary components of the stories. Both Ibn Ṭufayl and Suhrawardī admit that their own stories were written as improvements on, or as retorts to, the philosophical ideas presented in Avicenna's story<sup>25</sup>.

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*<sup>26</sup>. The clearest difference in form is between Avicenna's stories and that of Ibn Ṭufayl (and hence also of Ibn al-Nafīs, who follows him). Ibn Ṭufayl writes a longer story in prose, a novel. The figures of Ḥayy, 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 Ḥayy'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<sup>27</sup>.

As regards content, the plots and the symbols of the later compositions have some original elements compared to Avicenna's

«perhaps the most original work in Arabic literature» (quoted in L. E. Goodman's review, *Arch. Gesch. Philos.* 51 (1969), pp. 219-222).

<sup>24</sup> The names of Absāl and Salāmān as well as the motifs of spontaneous birth and the nursing gazelle.

<sup>25</sup> Ibn Ṭufayl, p. 106; Suhrawardī, p. 135.

<sup>26</sup> Malachi, p. 317.

<sup>27</sup> S. S. Hawi, *Islamic Naturalism and Mysticism: a philosophical study of Ibn Ṭufayl's Ḥayy bin Yaqzān* (Leiden, 1974) pp. 31-32. The difference between Avicenna's *Ḥayy* and Ibn Ṭufayl's was also noted by J. Wansbrough, *The Sectarial Milieu* (Oxford, 1978), p. 138.

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 Suhrawardī, 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<sup>28</sup>, 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 their bodies like cloaks, which they later take off, shedding them (as they turn) towards the world of sainthood<sup>29</sup>. These people 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 (*naqṣuḥā*). So if, among things that you happen to hear, you come to hear the story (*qiṣṣa*) of Salāmān and Absāl, know that Salāmān is a parable (*maṭal*) for yourself, whereas Absāl is a parable for your rank in divine knowledge, if you deserve it. Now follow this hint (*ramz*)<sup>30</sup>, if you can<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> Gohlman, p. 96.

<sup>29</sup> Compare Plotinus, *Enn.* IV.8.11-13; on the doffing metaphor, see F. Zimmerman, «The Origins of the So-called *Theology of Aristotle*», in J. Kraye et al., *Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages: The Theology and Other Texts* (London, 1986), pp. 138-141.

<sup>30</sup> *Ramz*—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 (*ramz*) is the indicative sign (*iṣārā*). Gutas' distinction between an image (*maṭal*) and an aggregate of symbols, an allegory (*ramz*; Gutas, p. 305), is unacceptable, since it identifies the hint with the story to which it relates. When the stories are referred to as *ramz*, this word again indicates their being a hint about something else, not their literary form (for example, Gohlman, p. 95: *risālat Ḥayy ibn Yaqṣān ... ramzan* «an al-ʿaql al-faṣṣāl»).

<sup>31</sup> *Iṣārāt*, pp. 198-199.

Avicenna tells us quite plainly that the story (*qiṣṣa*) needs to be interpreted, and that *grosso 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 Ġuzġānī, wrote meticulous commentaries of *Ḥayy*<sup>32</sup>. 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 he 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 far removed from the levels in which he was previously involved; by this he means the intelligibles<sup>33</sup>.

Obviously, Ibn Zaylā took the stories to be a scrupulously coded message which must be decoded word by word. Ṭūsī, who was a more distant disciple of Avicenna, apparently shared this view, for his commentary on *The Story of Salāmān and Absāl* follows the same pattern as Ibn Zaylā's and Ġuzġānī'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.

<sup>32</sup> Corbin, pp. 62-88; Goichon, pp. 7-8.

<sup>33</sup> Mehren, 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 *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* on the basis of the commentaries of Avicenna's disciples and of his own philosophy<sup>34</sup>. 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, *qīṣṣa* can be rendered in French as a «récit», provided that we «understand it in the simple sense»<sup>35</sup>. 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 *falāsifa* (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»<sup>36</sup>. Sometimes, when used by the *falāsifa* 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-

<sup>34</sup> Goichon, especially, pp. 9 and 15-17.

<sup>35</sup> Goichon, p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> Pines, «Philosophic Sources», p. LXXV.

sion was meant to protect not only the philosopher, but also the society in which he lived. Premature exposure to truth can be harmful. A person who is not properly prepared for the truth may be confused by it or misunderstand it, and the way he interprets this truth may not only be totally mistaken, but also dangerous. Human societies being what they are, i.e., composed mostly of non-philosophers, the responsible teacher must not divulge the truth to those incapable of understanding it. He must present ideas which are difficult to grasp in an enigmatic, veiled way, so that only the initiated will understand their true, deeper meaning. At the same time, this veiled discourse is also meant to guide the multitude gently and to bring them as close to the truth as they can get<sup>37</sup>.

The *falāsifa*'s attitude to the symbolic method led scholars like Gutas to assume that Avicenna's *qīṣṣa* must be interpreted in the framework of this attitude. According to this view, the stories would have two main functions: to teach the common people as much as they need to know, and to conceal from them that part of the same knowledge that might cause damage to them and to society<sup>38</sup>. According to this view, «the only use the allegorical method may have for superior minds is to invite them to 'philosophical research', to the demonstrative method»<sup>39</sup>.

This interpretation, however, turns out to be problematic. To begin with, if we assume that Avicenna's stories are an example of the *falāsifa*'s use of the allegorical method, we must add that they are an exceptional example of this use. Aristotelian philosophers prior to Avicenna did not compose stories: They usually applied the Platonic view of the role of the symbolic method to allegorical inter-

<sup>37</sup> On the Platonic origins of the *Falāsifa*'s political theory, see Lerner and Mahdi, pp. 16-17. On the question of whether Aristotle's *Politics* was ever translated into Arabic, see S. Pines, «Aristotle's *Politics* in Arabic Philosophy», *Israel Oriental Studies*, V. (1975), pp. 150-160, rpr. *The Collected Works of Shlomo Pines: Studies in Arabic Versions of Greek Texts and Medieval Science* (Jerusalem, 1986), pp. 146-156; and see now R. Brague, «Note sur la traduction arabe de la 'politique', derechef, qu'elle n'existe pas», to appear. For examples of the integration of the Platonic theory into Avicenna's Aristotelianism, see Avicenna's *Risāla fi ḥabāt al-nubuwwāt wa-ta'wīl rumūzihim*, in *Tis' rasā'il fi l-ḥikma wa'l-ṭabī'īyyāt* (Constantinople, 1297 H.), p. 85 (translated to English by M. E. Marmura, «On the Proof of Prophecies and the interpretation of the prophets symbols and metaphors», in Lerner and Mahdi, p. 1, and to French by Gardet, pp. 140-141, n. 7).

<sup>38</sup> Gutas, pp. 306-307.

<sup>39</sup> 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<sup>40</sup>.

There is, indeed, reason to believe that Avicenna's stories do not fit the model of the *falāsifa*'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 to go half way to discovering its content<sup>41</sup>. 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<sup>42</sup>.

Although, according to Avicenna,

It is not wrong for his speech to contain hints and pointers (*rumūz wa-išārāt*) which urge those who are naturally predisposed to engage in philosophical research<sup>43</sup> 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 «art 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

<sup>40</sup> On allegorical interpretation and allegorical composition, see J. Whitman, *Allegory—The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp. 3-13.

<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, introduction, p. 9:21-25 (= *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».

<sup>42</sup> Avicenna, *Healing, Metaphysics X*, translated by M. E. Marmura, in Lerner and Mahdi, p. 100. See also Gutas, p. 307.

<sup>43</sup> *Ilāhiyāt*, II, 443 (French translation in Anawati, II, p. 177).

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<sup>44</sup>.

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 Salāmān and Absāl* 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<sup>45</sup> were noted already by Corbin, and in his masterly study of the stories he endeavoured to avoid these shortcomings. Like the other commen-

<sup>44</sup> The translator of the *Guide*, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, was often criticized for being «a gossip who cannot keep a secret» (*holeḥ raḥīl u-megale sod*), that is to say, for being indiscreet and for breaking the secrecy imposed by Maimonides; see A. Ravitsky, «The Secret Teachings of the *Guide*: The Commentators in his Time and in Ours», *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 5 (1986), p. 36 (in Hebrew); Also *Idem*, «Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*», *AJS review* 6 (1981), p. 91, n. 16.

<sup>45</sup> Which is basically the approach adopted also by Goichon 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<sup>46</sup>. Avicenna designates the stories as *qışaṣ*, a word the root of which is *qṣṣ*. 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 *qışaṣ* 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<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup>, 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<sup>49</sup>. 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 Suhrawardī, *Ṣayḥ al-Isrāq*. One could almost say that Corbin reads Avicenna's stories as a commentary on Suhrawardī<sup>50</sup>. But, as noted above, Suhrawardī himself did not

<sup>46</sup> 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 poursuivie en général par les commentaires très rationnels de ces Récits, mais elles est inattentive à la transmutation 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...».

<sup>47</sup> Corbin, p. 43: «Ce n'est pas une *histoire* arrivée à d'autres, mais la sienne propre, son propre «roman spirituel», si l'on veut, mais *personnellement vécu*... C'est pourquoi nous n'avons retenu les désignations ni d'allégories mystiques, ni d'histoires ou contes philosophiques, mais celle de *Récits*, et de Récits visionnaires ou Récits d'initiations». See also Levin, «Gazelles», pp. 582-583.

<sup>48</sup> 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 (*wa-hum mukrahūn*; Amin, p. 53; Mehren, p. 21), which Corbin renders as «comblés de dons mystiques» (Corbin, p. 165).

<sup>49</sup> Gutas pertinently describes this search as Corbin's «obsession with what he perceived to be the allegedly ineffable Iranian spirituality» (Gutas, p. 299, n. 2).

<sup>50</sup> In fact, Corbin's initial and main interest was in the stories of Suhrawardī, 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 sohravardiens» Corbin, p. 14.

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 *Isrāqī* thinkers such as Suhrawardī, and on the other hand, by such philosophers as Ibn Ṭufayl, 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<sup>51</sup>. 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-Fārābī and Averroes saw poetry as a means of education to be used only in the most limited fashion<sup>52</sup>. 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<sup>53</sup>. 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-Fārābī, Ibn Bāğğa or Averroes writing true poetry<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>51</sup> Avicenna is «the only eminent philosopher considered as belonging to the Aristotelian school with regard to whom Maimonides, in his letter to Ibn Tibbon, expresses some reservations and even some mistrust» (Pines, Introduction to the *Guide*, p. xciii). 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 *Dalalat al-Hā'irīn*, III, 51, p. 454-455 (*Guide*, p. 618-619).

<sup>52</sup> Ibn Rušd, *Talḥiṣ kitāb aristūṭālīs fī l-ṣi'r*, in Badawi, p. 205: 17-21.

<sup>53</sup> Moses b. Maimon, *Responsa*, ed. J. Blau (Jerusalem, 1960), vol., II, pp. 397-398; *Idem*, Introduction to *Pereq Heleq, Commentary on the Mishna*, ed. J. Qafih (Jerusalem, 1964), *Neziqin*, p. 210 (*hāḍihī l-kutub l-mawḡūda 'inda al-ʿarab miṭla kutub al-tawārīḥ wa-siyar al-mulūk wa-ansāb al-ʿarab wa-kutub al-aḡānī wa-naḥwihā min al-kutub allatī lā 'ilma fihā wa-lā fā'ida ḡismāniyya illā talāf al-zamān faqaṭ*).

<sup>54</sup> For a list of the works in verse written by Averroes (which are mostly of the mnemonic or didactic kind), see Salvador Gomez Nogales, «Bibliografía sobre las obras de Averroes», in J. Jolivet, ed., *Multiple Averroës* (Paris, 1978), pp. 386-387. The few lines of verse with which Maimonides introduces his *Commentary on the Mishna* can hardly count as a poem or as an independent *piyyut*.

But Avicenna did. His *Ode of the Soul*<sup>55</sup> is, in many respects, a miniature version of the *Epistle of the Bird*<sup>56</sup>. 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 *qaṣīda*». Avicenna's stories are not *qaṣā'id*, and are never so described. Yet they too are clearly poetic creations<sup>57</sup>. 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 *qīṣaṣ* belong?

### III1. *The Falāsifa 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*<sup>58</sup>. As such, it attracted the same serious attention that the *falāsifa* accorded to Aristotle's works on logic. But since the translation movement did not include *belles lettres*, the *falāsifa* 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<sup>59</sup>. The meaning of the *Poetics* therefore remained a mystery to them<sup>60</sup>.

<sup>55</sup> *Ṣarḥ qaṣīdat Ibn sīnā fī l-naḥs*, ed. Zayn al-Dīn al-Manāwī (Cairo, 1955), translated into French by H. Massé, *Revue du Caire*, June 1951, p. 7.

<sup>56</sup> The similarity was noted by Goichon, p. 15.

<sup>57</sup> As noted by Goichon, p. 15, and see also above, note 3. On the other hand, see Henri Jahier and Abdelkader Noureddine, *Dīwan Ibn Sīnā: Anthologie de textes poétiques attribués à Avicenne*, (Algiers, 1960), pp. 10, 15, according to whom «in the stories ... poetry has only a limited role».

<sup>58</sup> R. Walzer, «Zur Traditionsgeschichte der aristotelischen Poetik», *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica* N.S. II (1934), pp. 5-14, rpr. Idem, *Greek into Arabic*, Oxford, 1962, pp. 129-136; Dahiyat, p. 12.

<sup>59</sup> Gardet, «*Humanisme*», p. 815; G. Wiet, «Les traducteurs arabes de la poésie grecque», *Mélanges René Mouterde* II (= *Mélanges de l'Université Saint Joseph* 38, 1962), pp. 361-368; J. Kraemer, «Arabische Homerverse», *ZDMG* 106 (1956), pp. 259. Hunayn ibn Ishāq was an exception to the rule, in that he seems to have read some Homer (G. Strohmaier, «Homer in Bagdad», *Byzantinoslavica* 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. 413-442, especially pp. 434-435).

<sup>60</sup> As noted, for example, Dahiyat, p. 28, and A. Trabulsi, *La critique poétique des Arabes* (Damascus, 1956), pp. 74-76. Al-Sirāfi'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<sup>61</sup>. 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<sup>62</sup>. And Abū l-Barakāt al-Baḡdādī, 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<sup>63</sup>.

Avicenna was the first Arab philosopher whose work on the *Poetics* is a commentary in the strict sense of the word<sup>64</sup>. That Avicenna was conscious of the difference between Arabic and Greek poetry is clear from several remarks in his commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*<sup>65</sup>. 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)<sup>66</sup>.

Unlike Averroes, Avicenna rarely resorted to substituting Arabic poetical constructions for the Greek ones<sup>67</sup>. I suggest that

(*wa-tadda'ūna al-ṣi' wa-lā ta'rifūnahu*, Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, *Al-imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa*, ed. A. Amīn and A. Al-Zayn, I, p. 123:2) may also be an allusion to the philosophers' awkward situation as regards the *Poetics*.

<sup>61</sup> Badawi, pp. 149-158; A. J. Arberry, «Fārābī's Canons of Poetry», *RSO* 17 (1938), pp. 266-278; Dahiyat, p. 17-18, 25-27.

<sup>62</sup> *Talḥīṣ kitāb Aristūṭālīs fī l-ṣi'*, Badawi, pp. 201-250; and see Vincente Cantarino, «Averroes on Poetry», in Gidhari L. Tikku, ed., *Islam and its Cultural Divergence: Studies in Honor of Gustave E. von Grunebaum* (Urbana, Chicago and London, 1971), pp. 10-26.

<sup>63</sup> See S. Pines, «Studies in Abū-l-Barakāt al-Baḡdādī's Poetics and Metaphysics», *Scripta Hierosolymitana* VI, pp. 268-274, rpr. *The Collected Works of Shlomo Pines, vol. I: Studies in Abū-l-Barakāt al-Baḡdādī Physics and Metaphysics* (Jerusalem 1979), pp. 129-135.

<sup>64</sup> *Fann al-ṣi' min kitāb al-ṣi'*, Badawi, pp. 167-198; and see Heinrichs, p. 155.

<sup>65</sup> Badawi, pp. 165, 167. See also Dahiyat, p. 12.

<sup>66</sup> Badawi, p. 167.

<sup>67</sup> See F. Gabrieli, «Estetica e poesia araba nell'interpretazione della poetica aristotelica presso Avicenna e Averroes», *RSO* XII (1929/30), pp. 291-331; Dahiyat, p. 30.



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 *Qiṣṣa 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»<sup>68</sup>. 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 emotions<sup>69</sup>.

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 tragedy<sup>70</sup>.

And again:

let us now discuss the proper structure of the Plot, since this is the most important thing in Tragedy<sup>71</sup>.

It is precisely this essential feature—the plot, the drama («form of action») — that captured Avicenna's attention. The plot (*qiṣṣa* or *ḥurāfa* in the translation used by Avicenna<sup>72</sup>) is one of the com-

<sup>68</sup> *Poetics* 1447:15.

<sup>69</sup> *Poetics*, VI, 2-3, 1449b 25-30.

<sup>70</sup> *Poetics*, VI, 9-15, 1450a 15-40.

<sup>71</sup> *Poetics*, VII, 1, 1450b 22.

<sup>72</sup> Avicenna probably used the version prepared by Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī. It is unclear whether this version was a new translation (F. E. Peters, *Aristoteles Arabus*, Leiden, 1968, pp. 23-28; Dahiyat, p. 7) or only a corrected version of Abū Biṣr 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,

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 scorn<sup>73</sup>. But in the translation of the *Poetics* used by Avicenna the word *ḥurāfa* is used in the same sense as *qiṣṣa* 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»<sup>74</sup>, and it is the imagination which produces the effect of *mimesis*. Speaking of the mimetic effect of poetry, Avicenna says:

People respond to imagination (*taḥyīl*) more easily than to verification (*taṣdīq*) ... 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 imagination<sup>75</sup>.

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 *falāsifa*'s attitude to poetry. But Avicenna also speaks here of «verification» (*taṣdīq*)<sup>76</sup> and imagination (*taḥyīl*) as interchangeable means to the same end. In other words, alongside the demonstrative way, Avicenna offers

*Analecta Orientalia Aristotelica* (London, 1887); Tkatsch, *Die arabischen Übersetzungen der Poetik* (Vienna, 1928); S. Afnan, «The Commentary of Avicenna on Aristotle's *Poetics*», *JRAS* (1947), pp. 188-191.

<sup>73</sup> See Plato, *Politeia*, II, 376-379. And see, for example, the evaluation of the belief in the hereafter as *ḥurāfāt al-ʿaḡāʾiz*, attributed to al-Fārābī in Ibn Ṭufayl, p. 112; Avicenna, *Ilbāt*, p. 82 (= Lerner and Mahdi, p. 113); and also Abū Biṣr in a passage of his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, quoted in Pseudo-Maḡrībī's *Ġāyat al-ḥakīm*, 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 *ḥurāfa* in this last passage as «stories which are untrue and absurd».

<sup>74</sup> Badawi, p. 167.

<sup>75</sup> Badawi, p. 162.

<sup>76</sup> On this key term in Aristotelian epistemology, see H. A. Wolfson, «The Terms *Taṣdīq* and *Taṣawwur* in Arabic Philosophy and their Greek, Latin and Hebrew Equivalents», *MW* 5 (1933), pp. 144 ff.

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 *falāsifa*. Paradoxically, this admission can be clearly seen in Maimonides' rejection of such artistic activities, where he says:

All songs and rythmical 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<sup>77</sup>.

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 *qiṣṣa* as just a lengthy *maṭal* or allegory. Like the plot in the Philosopher's view of the Greek tragedies, the *qiṣṣa* 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 *qiṣṣa*

Following Aristotle, Avicenna makes it quite clear that for him the *qiṣṣa*, philosophy and poetry are closely linked. But one may ask: how do we know that in writing his own *qiṣṣa* Avicenna envisaged the same *qiṣṣa* that he describes in the commentary to Aristotle's *Poetics*? Avicenna never calls his *qiṣṣa* «poetry» (*ṣiʿr*); 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 (*qiṣṣa*) 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.

<sup>77</sup> *Responsa*, II, pp. 398-399.

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<sup>78</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup>. 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-amṭāl wa'l-qiṣṣa*<sup>80</sup>) does not belong to poetry in any way.

<sup>78</sup> *Poetics* IX, 1-3, 1451a 36-1451b 5.

<sup>79</sup> See note 80 below.

<sup>80</sup> Dahiyat, p. 9, reads *qasas* and translates accordingly: «historical narratives». His understanding 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 *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* on the basis of the commentaries of Avicenna's disciples and of his own philosophy<sup>34</sup>. 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, *qiṣṣa* can be rendered in French as a «récit», provided that we «understand it in the simple sense»<sup>35</sup>. 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 *falāsifa* (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»<sup>36</sup>. Sometimes, when used by the *falāsifa* 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-

<sup>34</sup> Goichon, especially, pp. 9 and 15-17.

<sup>35</sup> Goichon, p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> Pines, «Philosophic Sources», p. LXXV.

sion was meant to protect not only the philosopher, but also the society in which he lived. Premature exposure to truth can be harmful. A person who is not properly prepared for the truth may be confused by it or misunderstand it, and the way he interprets this truth may not only be totally mistaken, but also dangerous. Human societies being what they are, i.e., composed mostly of non-philosophers, the responsible teacher must not divulge the truth to those incapable of understanding it. He must present ideas which are difficult to grasp in an enigmatic, veiled way, so that only the initiated will understand their true, deeper meaning. At the same time, this veiled discourse is also meant to guide the multitude gently and to bring them as close to the truth as they can get<sup>37</sup>.

The *falāsifa*'s attitude to the symbolic method led scholars like Gutas to assume that Avicenna's *qiṣaṣ* must be interpreted in the framework of this attitude. According to this view, the stories would have two main functions: to teach the common people as much as they need to know, and to conceal from them that part of the same knowledge that might cause damage to them and to society<sup>38</sup>. According to this view, «the only use the allegorical method may have for superior minds is to invite them to 'philosophical research', to the demonstrative method»<sup>39</sup>.

This interpretation, however, turns out to be problematic. To begin with, if we assume that Avicenna's stories are an example of the *falāsifa*'s use of the allegorical method, we must add that they are an exceptional example of this use. Aristotelian philosophers prior to Avicenna did not compose stories: They usually applied the Platonic view of the role of the symbolic method to allegorical inter-

<sup>37</sup> On the Platonic origins of the *Falāsifa*'s political theory, see Lerner and Mahdi, pp. 16-17. On the question of whether Aristotle's *Politics* was ever translated into Arabic, see S. Pines, «Aristotle's *Politics* in Arabic Philosophy», *Israel Oriental Studies*, V. (1975), pp. 150-160, rpr. *The Collected Works of Shlomo Pines: Studies in Arabic Versions of Greek Texts and Medieval Science* (Jerusalem, 1986), pp. 146-156; and see now R. Brague, «Note sur la traduction arabe de la 'politique', d'archef, qu'elle n'existe pas», to appear. For examples of the integration of the Platonic theory into Avicenna's Aristotelianism, see Avicenna's *Risāla fī ṭibāt al-nubuwwāt wa-ta'wīl rumūzihim*, in *Tis' rasā'il fī l-hikma wa'l-taḥī'iyāt* (Constantinople, 1297 H.), p. 85 (translated to English by M. E. Marmura, «On the Proof of Prophecies and the interpretation of the prophets symbols and metaphors», in Lerner and Mahdi, p. 1, and to French by Gardet, pp. 140-141, n. 7).

<sup>38</sup> Gutas, pp. 306-307.

<sup>39</sup> 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<sup>40</sup>.

There is, indeed, reason to believe that Avicenna's stories do not fit the model of the *falāsifa*'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 to go half way to discovering its content<sup>41</sup>. 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<sup>42</sup>.

Although, according to Avicenna,

It is not wrong for his speech to contain hints and pointers (*rumūz wa-išārāt*) which urge those who are naturally predisposed to engage in philosophical research<sup>43</sup> 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 «art 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

<sup>40</sup> On allegorical interpretation and allegorical composition, see J. Whitman, *Allegory—The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp. 3-13.

<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, *Dalālat al-Hā'irīn*, introduction, p. 9:21-25 (= *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».

<sup>42</sup> Avicenna, *Healing, Metaphysics X*, translated by M. E. Marmura, in Lerner and Mahdi, p. 100. See also Gutas, p. 307.

<sup>43</sup> *Ilāhiyāt*, II, 443 (French translation in Anawati, II, p. 177).

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<sup>44</sup>.

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 Salāmān and Absāl* 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<sup>45</sup> were noted already by Corbin, and in his masterly study of the stories he endeavoured to avoid these shortcomings. Like the other commen-

<sup>44</sup> The translator of the *Guide*, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, was often criticized for being «a gossip who cannot keep a secret» (*holeḥ raḥil u-megale sod*), that is to say, for being indiscreet and for breaking the secrecy imposed by Maimonides; see A. Ravitsky, «The Secret Teachings of the *Guide*: The Commentators in his Time and in Ours», *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 5 (1986), p. 36 (in Hebrew); Also *Idem*, «Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*», *AJS review* 6 (1981), p. 91, n. 16.

<sup>45</sup> Which is basically the approach adopted also by Goichon 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<sup>46</sup>. Avicenna designates the stories as *qiṣṣa*, a word the root of which is *qṣṣ*. 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 *qiṣṣa* 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<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup>, 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<sup>49</sup>. 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 Suhrawardī, *Šayḥ al-Iṣrāq*. One could almost say that Corbin reads Avicenna's stories as a commentary on Suhrawardī<sup>50</sup>. But, as noted above, Suhrawardī himself did not

<sup>46</sup> 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 poursuivie en général par les commentaires très rationnels de ces Récits, mais elles est inattentive à la transmutation 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...».

<sup>47</sup> Corbin, p. 43: «Ce n'est pas une *histoire* arrivée à d'autres, mais la sienne propre, son propre «roman spirituel», si l'on veut, mais *personnellement vécu*... C'est pourquoi nous n'avons retenu les désignations ni d'allégories mystiques, ni d'histoires ou contes philosophiques, mais celle de *Récits*, et de Récits visionnaires ou Récits d'initiations». See also Levin, «Gazelle», pp. 582-583.

<sup>48</sup> 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 (*wa-hum mukrahūn*; Amin, p. 53; Mehren, p. 21), which Corbin renders as «comblés de dons mystiques» (Corbin, p. 165).

<sup>49</sup> Gutas pertinently describes this search as Corbin's «obsession with what he perceived to be the allegedly ineffable Iranian spirituality» (Gutas, p. 299, n. 2).

<sup>50</sup> In fact, Corbin's initial and main interest was in the stories of Suhrawardī, 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 sohravardiens» Corbin, p. 14.

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 *Iṣrāqī* thinkers such as Suhrawardī, 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<sup>51</sup>. 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-Fārābī and Averroes saw poetry as a means of education to be used only in the most limited fashion<sup>52</sup>. 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<sup>53</sup>. 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-Fārābī, Ibn Bāḡḡa or Averroes writing true poetry<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>51</sup> Avicenna is «the only eminent philosopher considered as belonging to the Aristotelian school with regard to whom Maimonides, in his letter to Ibn Tibbon, expresses some reservations and even some mistrust» (Pines, Introduction to the *Guide*, p. xciii). 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 *Dalālat al-Hā'irīn*, III, 51, p. 454-455 (*Guide*, p. 618-619).

<sup>52</sup> Ibn Ruṣd, *Talḥiṣ kitāb aristūṭālīs fī l-ṣi'ar*, in Badawi, p. 205: 17-21.

<sup>53</sup> Moses b. Maimon, *Responsa*, ed. J. Blau (Jerusalem, 1960), vol. II, pp. 397-398; *Idem*, Introduction to *Pereq Heleq, Commentary on the Mishna*, ed. J. Qafih (Jerusalem, 1964), *Neziqin*, p. 210 (*hāḡiḡi l-kutub l-mawḡūda 'inda al-'arab miṭla kutub al-tawārīḡ wa-siyar al-mulūk wa-ansāb al-'arab wa-kutub al-aḡānī wa-naḡwihā min al-kutub allatī lā 'ilma fihā wa-lā fā'ida ḡismāniyya illā talāf al-zamān faqaf*).

<sup>54</sup> For a list of the works in verse written by Averroes (which are mostly of the mnemonic or didactic kind), see Salvador Gomez Nogales, «Bibliografía sobre las obras de Averroes», in J. Jolivet, ed., *Multiple Averroës* (Paris, 1978), pp. 386-387. The few lines of verse with which Maimonides introduces his *Commentary on the Mishna* can hardly count as a poem or as an independent *piyyut*.

But Avicenna did. His *Ode of the Soul*<sup>55</sup> is, in many respects, a miniature version of the *Epistle of the Bird*<sup>56</sup>. 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 *qaṣīda*». Avicenna's stories are not *qaṣā'id*, and are never so described. Yet they too are clearly poetic creations<sup>57</sup>. 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 *qīṣaṣ* belong?

### III.1. *The Falāsifa 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*<sup>58</sup>. As such, it attracted the same serious attention that the *falāsifa* accorded to Aristotle's works on logic. But since the translation movement did not include *belles lettres*, the *falāsifa* 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<sup>59</sup>. The meaning of the *Poetics* therefore remained a mystery to them<sup>60</sup>.

<sup>55</sup> *Ṣarḥ qaṣīdat Ibn sinā fī l-naḥs*, ed. Zayn al-Dīn al-Manāwī (Cairo, 1955), translated into French by H. Massé, *Revue du Caire*, June 1951, p. 7.

<sup>56</sup> The similarity was noted by Goichon, p. 15.

<sup>57</sup> As noted by Goichon, p. 15, and see also above, note 3. On the other hand, see Henri Jahier and Abdelkader Noureddine, *Dīwan Ibn Sīnā: Anthologie de textes poétiques attribués à Avicenne*, (Algiers, 1960), pp. 10, 15, according to whom «in the stories ... poetry has only a limited role».

<sup>58</sup> R. Walzer, «Zur Traditionsgeschichte der aristotelischen Poetik», *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica* N.S. II (1934), pp. 5-14, rpr. Idem, *Greek into Arabic*, Oxford, 1962, pp. 129-136; Dahiyat, p. 12.

<sup>59</sup> Gardet, «*Humanisme*», p. 815; G. Wiet, «Les traducteurs arabes de la poésie grecque», *Mélanges René Mouterde* II (= *Mélanges de l'Université Saint Joseph* 38, 1962), pp. 361-368; J. Kraemer, «Arabische Homerverse», *ZDMG* 106 (1956), pp. 259. Hunayn ibn Ishāq was an exception to the rule, in that he seems to have read some Homer (G. Strohmaier, «Homer in Bagdad», *Byzantinoslavica* 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. 413-442, especially pp. 434-435).

<sup>60</sup> As noted, for example, Dahiyat, p. 28, and A. Trabulsi, *La critique poétique des Arabes* (Damascus, 1956), pp. 74-76. Al-Sīrāfi'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<sup>61</sup>. 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<sup>62</sup>. And Abū l-Barakāt al-Baḡdādī, 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<sup>63</sup>.

Avicenna was the first Arab philosopher whose work on the *Poetics* is a commentary in the strict sense of the word<sup>64</sup>. That Avicenna was conscious of the difference between Arabic and Greek poetry is clear from several remarks in his commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*<sup>65</sup>. 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)<sup>66</sup>.

Unlike Averroes, Avicenna rarely resorted to substituting Arabic poetical constructions for the Greek ones<sup>67</sup>. I suggest that

(*wa-taddaʿūna al-ṣiʿr wa-lā taʿrifūnahu*, Abū Hayyān al-Tawhīdī, *Al-imtāʿ wa-l-muʾānasa*, ed. A. Amīn and A. Al-Zayn, I, p. 123:2) may also be an allusion to the philosophers' awkward situation as regards the *Poetics*.

<sup>61</sup> Badawī, pp. 149-158; A. J. Arberry, «Fārābī's Canons of Poetry», *RSO* 17 (1938), pp. 266-278; Dahiyat, p. 17-18, 25-27.

<sup>62</sup> *Talḥīṣ kitāb Aristūṭālīs fī l-ṣiʿr*, Badawī, pp. 201-250; and see Vincente Cantarino, «Averroes on Poetry», in Gidhari L. Tikku, ed., *Islam and its Cultural Divergence: Studies in Honor of Gustave E. von Grunebaum* (Urbana, Chicago and London, 1971), pp. 10-26.

<sup>63</sup> See S. Pines, «Studies in Abū-l-Barakāt al-Baḡdādī's *Poetics* and *Metaphysics*», *Scripta Hierosolymitana* VI, pp. 268-274, rpr. *The Collected Works of Shlomo Pines, vol. I: Studies in Abū-l-Barakāt al-Baḡdādī Physics and Metaphysics* (Jerusalem 1979), pp. 129-135.

<sup>64</sup> *Fann al-ṣiʿr min kitāb al-ṣiʿr*, Badawī, pp. 167-198; and see Heinrichs, p. 155.

<sup>65</sup> Badawī, pp. 165, 167. See also Dahiyat, p. 12.

<sup>66</sup> Badawī, p. 167.

<sup>67</sup> See F. Gabrieli, «Estetica e poesia araba nell'interpretazione della poetica aristotelica presso Avicenna e Averroes», *RSO* XII (1929/30), pp. 291-331; Dahiyat, p. 30.

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 *Qiṣṣa 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»<sup>68</sup>. 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 emotions<sup>69</sup>.

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 tragedy<sup>70</sup>.

And again:

let us now discuss the proper structure of the Plot, since this is the most important thing in Tragedy<sup>71</sup>.

It is precisely this essential feature—the plot, the drama («form of action») — that captured Avicenna's attention. The plot (*qiṣṣa* or *ḥurāfa* in the translation used by Avicenna<sup>72</sup>) is one of the com-

<sup>68</sup> *Poetics* 1447:15.

<sup>69</sup> *Poetics*, VI, 2-3, 1449b 25-30.

<sup>70</sup> *Poetics*, VI, 9-15, 1450a 15-40.

<sup>71</sup> *Poetics*, VII, 1, 1450b 22.

<sup>72</sup> Avicenna probably used the version prepared by Yahyā ibn ʿAdī. It is unclear whether this version was a new translation (F. E. Peters, *Aristoteles Arabus*, Leiden, 1968, pp. 23-28; Dahiyat, p. 7) or only a corrected version of Abū Biṣr 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,

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 scorn<sup>73</sup>. But in the translation of the *Poetics* used by Avicenna the word *ḥurāfa* is used in the same sense as *qiṣṣa* 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»<sup>74</sup>, and it is the imagination which produces the effect of *mimesis*. Speaking of the mimetic effect of poetry, Avicenna says:

People respond to imagination (*taḥyīl*) more easily than to verification (*taṣdīq*) ... 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 imagination<sup>75</sup>.

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 *falāsifa*'s attitude to poetry. But Avicenna also speaks here of «verification» (*taṣdīq*)<sup>76</sup> and imagination (*taḥyīl*) as interchangeable means to the same end. In other words, alongside the demonstrative way, Avicenna offers

*Analecta Orientalia Aristotelica* (London, 1887); Tkatsch, *Die arabischer Übersetzungen der Poetik* (Vienna, 1928); S. Afnan, «The Commentary of Avicenna on Aristotle's *Poetics*», *JRAS* (1947), pp. 188-191.

<sup>73</sup> See Plato, *Politeia*, II, 376-379. And see, for example, the evaluation of the belief in the hereafter as *ḥurāfat al-ʿaḡāʾiz*, attributed to al-Fārābī in Ibn Tufayl, p. 112; Avicenna, *Iḥbāt*, p. 82 (= Lerner and Mahdi, p. 113); and also Abū Biṣr in a passage of his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, quoted in Pseudo-Maḡrībī's *Gāyat al-ḥakīm*, 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 *ḥurāfa* in this last passage as «stories which are untrue and absurd».

<sup>74</sup> Badawi, p. 167.

<sup>75</sup> Badawi, p. 162.

<sup>76</sup> On this key term in Aristotelian epistemology, see H. A. Wolfson, «The Terms *Taṣdīq* and *Taṣawwur* in Arabic Philosophy and their Greek, Latin and Hebrew Equivalents», *MW* 5 (1933), pp. 144 ff.

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 *falāsifa*. Paradoxically, this admission can be clearly seen in Maimonides' rejection of such artistic activities, where he says:

All songs and rythmical 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<sup>77</sup>.

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 *qiṣṣa* as just a lengthy *maṭal* or allegory. Like the plot in the Philosopher's view of the Greek tragedies, the *qiṣṣa* 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 *qiṣṣa*

Following Aristotle, Avicenna makes it quite clear that for him the *qiṣṣa*, philosophy and poetry are closely linked. But one may ask: how do we know that in writing his own *qiṣṣa* Avicenna envisaged the same *qiṣṣa* that he describes in the commentary to Aristotle's *Poetics*? Avicenna never calls his *qiṣṣa* «poetry» (*ṣīʿr*); 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 (*qiṣṣa*) 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.

<sup>77</sup> *Responsa*, II, pp. 398-399.

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<sup>78</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup>. 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-amṭāl wa'l-qiṣṣa*<sup>80</sup>) does not belong to poetry in any way.

<sup>78</sup> *Poetics* IX, 1-3, 1451a 36-1451b 5.

<sup>79</sup> See note 80 below.

<sup>80</sup> Dahiyat, p. 9, reads *qaṣaṣ* and translates accordingly: «historical narratives». His understanding is perhaps influenced by the example of Herodotus in Aristotle's text. But here as throughout Avicenna's commentary of the *Poetics*, the



This sentence sets out the theme of the whole of what follows in this quotation, which is that «parables and stories» are profoundly different in nature from poetry. Avicenna sees *mimesis* (*muḥākāt*) as the quintessential feature of poetry, and indeed refers by metonymy to poetry as *muḥākāyāt* (see below). It is evident from this passage that he believed that there was a different (apparently inferior) type of *mimesis* that appeared in «parables and stories» (and perhaps in other non-poetic genres). He does not say anything about this kind of *mimesis*, and it was apparently of little importance to him.

Poetry refers only to matters the existence of which is possible, or to that which must exist and thus enters the category of the necessary. Stories would be like poetry if the difference between myths (*ḥurāfa*) and imitations (*muḥākāyāt*) were simply that the latter are in verse and the former are not<sup>81</sup>. But this is not so.

*Ḥurāfa* here is not a synonym of *qiṣṣa* in the sense of plot (contrast p. 198 above). It is used rather as an equivalent of the phrase «parables and stories», and as such is *opposed* to poetic *mimesis* (whereas *ḥurāfa* in its other sense is an essential part of poetry). By «parables and stories» Avicenna does not mean two distinct genres, and he now goes on to give us an example of a *ḥurāfa*, a parable or a story.

Speech needs be directed either towards something that exists or towards something that does not exist. Consider two different books of the Greeks, both written in verse<sup>82</sup>, but one containing poetry, the other resembling *Kalīla wa-Dimna* and not containing poetry. The difference between these two books is not only that one is in verse and the other is not<sup>83</sup>. If the one that resembles *Kalīla wa-Dimna* were written in prose, it would not be deficient and would not lose its effect. It would in fact have its desired effect, that is, to communicate opinions that are the result of experience<sup>84</sup> of situations which relate to things lacking actual existence. The reason [that the book that resembles *Kalīla wa-Dimna* does not need to be in verse] is that the purpose

synonym of *maṭal* and of *ḥurāfa* is *qiṣṣa*, pl. *qiṣaṣ*. *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, which appears in the following lines, can hardly be characterized as a historical account, despite its «historical anecdotes» referred to by Dahiyat (p. 99, n. 3).

<sup>81</sup> Literally: «If the difference ... were only in metre (*wazn*)».

<sup>82</sup> This sentence seems to suggest that Avicenna thought that Herodotus wrote in verse.

<sup>83</sup> Avicenna appears to have become a bit muddled in his attempt to explain Aristotle's text by substituting the familiar *Kalīla wa-Dimna* (which is in prose) for the unfamiliar example given by Aristotle (presumably Herodotus), which Avicenna has just described as written in verse.

<sup>84</sup> Literally: «the results and the acquired experience» (*natā' iḡ wa-taḡārib*), but compare two lines below: *natīḡat al-taḡriba*.

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 existent better than the other genre and is closer than it to universal judgment.<sup>85</sup>

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 *qaṣā'id* 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 *ḥurāfa*) 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 (*qiṣṣa* or *ḥurāfa*) in the poetry described by Aristotle.

In later discussions of poetry in Arabic the reference to *Kalīla wa-Dimna* was used as a matter of course<sup>86</sup>, often without understanding the original Avicennian role of this example. Al-Qarṭāḡannī (d. 1285) even mentions it as the kind of fable which was typical of Greek poetry<sup>87</sup>. 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 *qiṣṣa*.

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

<sup>85</sup> *Al-Ṣifāʾ*, p. 54; Badawī, p. 183. Parts of this text are translated in Dahiyat, pp. 99-100 (into English) and Heinrichs, p. 181 (into German).

<sup>86</sup> For example by Averroes, Badawī, p. 214; and by the Jewish author Joseph Ibn 'Aqnīn, in his commentary on the *Song of Songs*, *Inkišāf al-Asrār wa-Zuhūr al-Anwār*, ed. A. S. Halkin (Jerusalem, 1964), p. 2.

<sup>87</sup> Abū l-Ḥasan ʿĪzīm al-Qarṭāḡannī, *Minhāḡ al-bulagāʾ wa-sirāḡ al-udabāʾ*, ed. Ibn al-Ḥoḡa (Beirut, 1981), p. 68-69.

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<sup>88</sup>.) *The Story of Salāmān and Absāl* 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<sup>89</sup>, he wrote his stories while being held a prisoner in Faraḡān. At about this time he was in the middle of the lengthy process of writing the *Šifā'*, 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<sup>90</sup>.

### 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 *qiṣṣa*. It is also easier to estimate the uniqueness of Avicenna's stories. Unlike the Isma'īlīs before him, or Ibn Ṭufayl and Suhrawardī 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 *qiṣṣa*. In fact, Corbin came very close to understanding the exact meaning of the *qiṣṣa*. He realized that the «recital» had a mimetic role<sup>91</sup>, but since he was not prepared to see it in Peripatetic

<sup>88</sup> As noted by Dahiyat, pp. 52-55.

<sup>89</sup> Note 4.

<sup>90</sup> See Gohlman, pp. 46-48, 62; Gardet, «humanisme», p. 821-822; Gutas, pp. 140-141.

<sup>91</sup> Corbin, p. 43: «L'âme ne peut la dire qu'à la 1<sup>re</sup> personne, la «réciter», comme dans cette figure que la grammaire arabe appelle «*ḥikāya*» (histoire, mais littéralement *mimesis*, imitation), où le récitant reproduit ... les termes mêmes dont s'est servi l'interlocuteur ...». Also Corbin, p. 12: «Ces récits, en substituant une dramaturgie à la cosmologie ...».

terms, he remained unaware of the precise dramatic context of the *qiṣṣa*. 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-*Isrāqī* genre. For Avicenna, the story was soundly grounded in the Aristotelian tradition as he understood it.

### Abbreviations of frequently quoted works

- Amin = Aḥmad Amīn, *Ḥayy b. Yaqzān li-l-Suhrawardī* (Miṣr, 1952).  
*Ilāhiyāt* = Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Šifā'*, *Al-Ilāhiyāt*, ed. Ibrāhīm Madkūr (Cairo, 1960).  
 Badawī = A. Badawī, *Aristūṭālīs Fann al-Ši'r, ma'a l-targama l-'arabiyya l-qadima wa-šurūḥ al-Farābī wa-ibn Sīnā wa-ibn Rušd* (Cairo, 1952).  
 Corbin = Henry Corbin, *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire: Etudes sur le cycle des récits avicenniens* (Paris, 1979).  
 Dahiyat = I. M. Dahiyat, *Avicenna's Commentary on the Poetics of Aristotle* (Leiden, 1974).  
*Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn* = Moshe ben Maimon, *Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn*, ed. Yoel (Jerusalem, 1929).  
 Gardet, *Avicenne* = L. Gardet, *La pensée religieuse d'Avicenne (Ibn Sīnā)*, (Paris, 1951).  
 Gardet, «humanisme» = *Idem*, «L'humanisme gréco-arabe: Avicenne», *Cahiers d'histoire mondiale* II (1955), pp. 812-834.  
 Gohlman = William E. Gohlman, ed. and trans., *The Life of Ibn Sīnā* (Albany, 1974).  
 Goichon, *Ḥayy* = A.-M. Goichon, *Le récit de Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān commenté par des textes d'Avicenne* (Paris, 1959).  
 Goichon, *Lexique* = *Idem*, *Lexique de la langue philosophique d'Ibn Sīnā* (Paris, 1938).  
 Guide = Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Sh. Pines (Chicago and London, 1963).  
 Gutas = D. Gutas, *Avicenna and The Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works* (Leiden, 1988).  
 Heinrichs = Wolfhardt Heinrichs, *Arabische Dichtung und griechische Poetik: Hazim al-Qartaḡānnīs Grundlegung der Poetik mit Hilfe aristotelischer Begriffe* (Beirut, 1969).  
 Ibn Ezra = *Ḥayy ben Meqiz le'Avraham Ibn Ezra*, ed. I. Levin (Tel Aviv, 1983).  
 Ibn Ṭufayl = Ibn Ṭufayl, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, ed. Fārūq Sa'd (Beirut, 1980).  
*Isārāt* = Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-iṣārāt wa'l-tanbihāt — Le livre des théorèmes et des avertissements*, ed. J. Forget (Leiden, 1892).  
 Lerner and Mahdi = R. Lerner and M. Mahdi, eds., *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (Toronto, 1963).  
 Levin = I. Levin, «The Gazelle and the Birds; On Megillat Ha-Ofer of Rabbi Elijah Ha-Cohen and Treatise On the Birds of Avicenna», in *Essays in Memory of Dan Pagis*, II, *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature*, 11 (1988), pp. 577-611 (in Hebrew).  
 Malachi = Z. Mal'achi, «Megilat ha'ofar of Rabbi Eliahu ha-Kohen, an allegorical maqama from Spain», in Z. Malachi, ed., *Aharon Mirsky Jubilee Volume: Essays on Jewish Culture* (Lod, 1986), pp. 324-341.  
 Mehren = M. A. F. Mehren, *Traité mystiques d'Abou Ali al-Hosain b. Abdallah b. Sīnā ou d'Avicenne* (Leiden: Brill, 1889).  
 Pines, «Philosophic Sources» = «The Philosophic Sources of the Guide of the

Perplexed», in the introduction to his translation of Moses Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago and London, 1963).

*Poetics* = S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, with a critical text and translation of the Poetics* (London, 1951).

Suhrawardī = Šihabaddīn Yahyā as-Suhrawardī, *Oeuvres métaphysiques et mystiques*, Vol. II, ed. Henri Corbin (Tehran and Paris, 1952); Vol. III, *Les œuvres persanes de Suhrawardī*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, prolégomènes, analyses et commentaires par Henri Corbin (Tehran and Paris, 1970).