

Averroes, *Averroes' Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics*, Translation, Introduction, and Notes by Charles E. Butterworth (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2000), xxi+161 pp.

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Book Review

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The book that I will try to review here is *Averroes' Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics* translated into English, introduced, and annotated by Prof. Charles E. Butterworth, and published in 2000. We have two editions of the book. The first edition was published in 1980, the second edition was made in 2000 and Prof. Butterworth wrote a new Preface in which he clarified the translation method that he used for his translation with its reasons and examples. For this reason, I write this review on the second edition of the book. I need to clarify why I review this book twenty years after the second edition of it: First, I want to remind that studying classical logic and philosophy texts



and translating them into another language in the modern period is not easy and requires a very meticulous effort without expecting a response. Second, I have the same translation experience for this book. I translated *Averroes' Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics* from the Arabic edition of Charles E. Butterworth and Ahmad A. Haridi into Turkish in 2019, I used this edition there, and I also translated Butterworth's Arabic Preface, Arabic Introduction, Arabic summary, and some of the tables that he prepared so that the text could be understood easier and added all of those into my work.¹ This interesting translation experience taught me how difficult to have a good grasp of the depths of such a classical book in which Averroes attempted to adapt Aristotle's poetical theory to the Arabic poetry tradition about fifteen centuries later. In other words, it should not be easy to reexpress an ancient book (Ibn Rushd's *Talkhis Kitab al-Shi'r*) that aims to adapt the philosophical meanings in the other ancient book (Aristotelês' *Peri Poiêtikês*) that puts forward the universal rules derived from poetry tradition belonging to a particular language and culture, to the poetry tradition of its own language and culture, with comments in a modern language (*Averroes' Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics*). And when I read Butterworth's works, I cannot stop myself remembering Abu Tammam's verse as follows: "It is easy for us to speak and for you to act (لهان علينا أن نقول وتفعل)." I also must say the same, for instance, for the Arabic translation of Abu Bishr Matta and the Turkish translations of Mübahat Türker Küyel, Hamdi Rağıp Atademir and Ömer Türker from Aristotle, al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. Here, I would like to bring this book back to the agenda, for that, I will try to summarize the book and draw attention to Butterworth's translation style.

As said above, Charles E. Butterworth edited Averroes' original Arabic text, he also wrote Arabic Preface, Arabic Introduc-

¹ İbn Rüşd, *Poetika (Şiir) Orta Şerhi*, Tr. trans. Ali Tekin (İstanbul: Endülüs Yayınları, 2019).

tion, and prepared useful tables in Arabic for the book.² He used this edition that he prepared with Ahmad A. Haridi in his English translation (p. xiii). The book consists of the preface for the first edition in 1980 (p. ix-xvi), a new preface for the second edition in 2000 (p. xvii-xxi), one introduction (p. 3-49), one summary of the book (the Order of the Argument) (p. 51-58) and the English translation with notes (p. 59-142).

In the first Preface, Butterworth mentions Hermannus Alemannus' inadequate Latin translation of Averroes' *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics*, O. B. Hardison's English translation of this Latin translation, the unacceptable considerations of Ernest Renan and Luis Borges on Averroes' *Middle Commentary*, publications of the Arabic original of the commentary, Vicente Cantarino's imaginative rewriting, Shukri 'Ayyad's and Kamal al-Rhubi's masterly studies on the field (p. ix) and then he clarifies his aim of this study: "I hope that the present English translation of Averroes' *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics* with its introduction and notes, as well as the critical Arabic edition on which it is based, will quicken scholarly interest in this fascinating treatise and inspire some alert minds to consider the prevailing ill-informed judgments about his understanding of Aristotle's *Poetics*" (p. x). Butterworth reminds us of the commentary styles that Averroes used. Averroes wrote two commentaries on the *Poetics*. One of them is the *Short Commentary on Poetics* and the second one is the *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics* translated in this book (p. x-xi). Because he did not know Greek, Averroes studied the Arabic translation of Aristotle's text. Aristotle's *Poetics* was translated from Syriac into Arabic by Abu Bishr Matta and we are not sure whether Averroes used it or not but it is possible. In any case, Averroes' aim was not to understand and to explain Aristotle's own text but in the commentary he tried to grasp the universal nature of the art of poetry in his own world. Butterworth utters Averroes' project as follows: "Averroes' goal

² Ibn Rushd, *Talkhīṣ Kitāb ash-Shi'r*, eds. Charles Butterworth and Ahmad Abd al-Majid ak-Harīdī (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-Āmma li al-Kitāb, 1986).

here is not simply to make Aristotle's more readily accessible but to draw from it principles of poetry common to all or most nations" (p. xii). Towards the end of the first Preface, he gives information about the translation method and the text preparation technique he followed.

In the Preface to the second edition Butterworth utters the pleasure of seeing the new edition of the book, just points out speculation that the book did not get enough attention and he does not care about that (p. xv). I think it is natural and normal for a classical commentary book written in Arabic on Aristotle in the classical period in the Islamic world. In fact, he draws attention to this situation in the Preface of another book by the name of *Averroes' Three Short Commentaries on Aristotle's "Topics", "Rhetoric" and "Poetics"*.³ After that, Butterworth says that the translation did not need a fundamental change although it had been criticized in some ways and gives some examples for some terms criticized. Some readers claimed the translation was closer to Greek and Arabic than to English (p. xviii). We can say this is a classical discussion about the translation method. Some translators prefer a translation method based on the meaning the author of the book means and then try to express this meaning in his or her own language. On the other hand, according to the translators who follow the literal translation way, the translator has to reexpress the text on its own terms, otherwise, we cannot claim the text we translated is a translation, but it might be closer to paraphrase. In the translation, we must use the same word in our translation for every single technical term in the main text as possible but if it is very difficult to find the same word in our language we may change the word and maybe we can translate it based on meaning. Butterworth expresses it as follows: "...So that the words used to reflect the nuances of the original without unduly prejudging it, the translator must strive to use the same

³ Charles E. Butterworth, *Averroes' Three Short Commentaries on Aristotle's "Topics", "Rhetoric" and "Poetics"* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), vii-viii.

word in his or her own language for the same word in the language being translated and to use the one word alone for the other. Synonyms are just that, synonyms; and they should be rendered accordingly, not translated willy-nilly as it strikes the translator's fancy" (p. xix). After the discussion about the translation method, he puts forth how Averroes adapted Aristotle's poetical theory in Greek culture to his own Arabic culture. According to this, Averroes tried to grasp the universal rules of the art of poetry and after that, he tried to adapt the universal theory to his own particular world (p. xx-xxi). At the end of the Preface to the second edition, Butterworth reminds us of the tension between philosophy and poetics, and he points out what he thinks about this problem (p. xxi).

It can be said that the Introduction consists of four parts. In the first part, Butterworth mentions the power of poetry in societies, its being more influential than philosophy, societies' perceptions of their poetic traditions, and the etymology of the words used for poetry in Greek and Arabic (p. 3-6). For Westerns, names such as Odysseus, Achilles and Agamemnon are well known, but Dhu al-Rumamah or his poetry does not make sense. It is clear that if it is known it allows them to envisage what they have perhaps never experienced (p. 4). In the second part of the Introduction Butterworth reveals the essence of Plato's discussion and criticism about poetry in the *Republic* and the *Ion*, then he compares the perspectives in these two dialogues before moving to Averroes' text because Averroes wrote a *Middle Commentary* on Plato's *Republic* as well (p. 6-11). Butterworth says that consequently we can not learn from Plato's works the nature of the art of poetry and we can get the universal rules of this art from Aristotle's *Poetics* (p. 11). I think we can reemphasize here that Aristotle was not a poet but he was a philosopher and he analyzed the nature of the art of poetry as a philosopher. We can say the same consideration for the art of rhetoric, the art of dialectic, the art of sophistry as well. Aristotle investigates those who are practitioners of these activities and then he analyzes and puts for-

ward what their natures are universally in his own works that he writes them as arts. Therefore, if we want to learn what the art of poetry is and why it is so attractive to us we need a good grasp of Aristotle's book. For this reason, Butterworth says at the beginning of the third part of the Introduction as follows: "Only by philosophic inquiry into, rather than an attack upon poetry and its adherents can we acquire such knowledge. For that kind of inquiry, we must turn to Aristotle and Averroes. They do recognize the necessity of investigating poetry as an art and of indicating where it belongs in the hierarchy of knowledge..." (p. 11-12). Because he read Aristotle's text from an Arabic translation, Averroes tried to adapt the theory to his own context and his goal was not Aristotle's text reexplain Averroes had some different explanations in his text. It was natural but despite these differences, he agrees with Aristotle on the essential character of poetry (p. 13). Here Butterworth offers us two tables in which he compares the books of both philosophers Aristotle and Averroes chapter by chapter and he investigates and analyzes two philosophers' views about the art of poetry in detail (p. 11-46). While revealing how Averroes interpreted Aristotle's theory by comparisons, Butterworth also clarifies Averroes' view of why Arabs are not a natural nation other than those from Andalusia (p. 42-46). In the last part, he mentions Aristotle and Averroes' views about the evolutionary structure of poetry, how they studied on poetry differently from Plato and what Averroes' aim in his own book (p. 46-49).

After the Introduction Butterworth shows us the summary of Averroes' *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics* paragraph by paragraph (p. 51-58). This summary is very essential for those who try to grasp the whole book easier.

It is not true for me to talk about the English translation of *Averroes' Middle Commentary of Aristotle's Poetics* because I do not see myself good enough for this kind of consideration about that, but I can repeat what I think about the translation method that I also prefer here, and I can also express briefly what I feel

when I read his translation. It is possible to say that the way of translation that Butterworth prefers is faithful to the original Arabic text and literal. As known literal translation method can be criticized because it is closer to the original language of the text. In my opinion, this depends on the translator's choice in translation. I also prefer literal translation personally. We can see the translators who translated some of Aristotle's text by using this way in the classical period. For example, if we try to read Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* in Greek and Abu Bishr Matta's translation, we can easily find the same words and same structures of the sentences in two languages although Abu Bishr translated the book from Syriac, not Greek. This way of translation is also useful for those who learn classical languages for studying on the logical and philosophical text. Perhaps those who read translations but do not need to look at the original text think that translations are not smoothy in their own languages but if we try to analyze a classical text in its original language and want to comment correctly literal, the translation will be more useful for us. We can also add that literal translation is more difficult and requires keeping each word in mind throughout the text (p. xiii-xiv) but for example, if we want to express the meaning in a more aesthetic way we can also use another method; we can use other translations of the same text, read about the topic in the text and then we can try to reexpress the text in our language as a paraphrase, or we can try to write a new commentary on that text in our own language.

Finally, it must be pointed out that the notes that Butterworth wrote for his translation are very useful specially to understand the examples from Arabic poetry that Averroes gave because Butterworth gives information about those verses and comments to make them understandable.

