CHAPTER EIGHT
THE ELABORATION OF METHODS

1. The Evolution of Avicenna’s Methods of Communication

The development of Avicenna’s different methods of composition runs parallel to the evolution of his attitude toward Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition. With increasing awareness of independence from that tradition there came a corresponding independence of style and experimentation with different approaches and methods of communication.

Initially Avicenna saw himself as a commentator on the Aristotelian texts, and his style was accordingly expository, reformulating the accepted doctrines as transmitted. In the transition period of his literary activity, the need to incorporate in his works material not readily treated in the tradition—primarily subjects that belong to the Metaphysics of the Rational Soul—led Avicenna to approach the work of composition by following not so much the contents of the tradition as the doctrine about Aristotle’s presumed obscurity which stood in need of explication. This enabled Avicenna to write about what he perceived to be the “fruits” of Physics and Metaphysics while claiming to be expounding the “innermost ideas stored in the depths” of Peripatetic books and “Withheld from explicit mention” (T5, §1; cf. T4, §3). In his mature period, and with increased self-confidence, Avicenna abandoned this approach and reverted to the expository method. Only this time the philosophical doctrines, which include the material introduced in the preceding period under the guise of decoding Peripatetic obfuscation, were presented as the work of Avicenna’s own synthesis of what was best in the tradition with his own thoughts, and without reference to the authority of the tradition (T9, §1; T7, §3). In the following period, Avicenna attempted to set up his revised systematization of philosophy as a separate philosophical school native to his place of origin, Ḫurāsān (the East), and to delineate its identity sharply by explicitly contrasting it with the Aristotelian tradition. This innovation by Avicenna found little response in his immediate milieu; despite the wide receptivity shown to his revised systematization, the drastic break with the Peripatetic tradition indicated by its new name was not appreciated. In his last period, finally, Avicenna actively used the Peripatetic doctrine of deliberate
obscurity and treated philosophy in such a way that would withhold it from those unworthy to receive it.

This brief summary highlights the course of Avicenna's approach to communicating philosophical knowledge only as represented in the major works of each period. Throughout most of his life, however, or at least from his mature period onwards, Avicenna was continuously preoccupied with elaborating methods of composition and with fashioning the means of presentation to fit the audience he was addressing in each particular case. Almost all of his works were written for patrons who requested them from him. In the main we do not know the reactions, or the extent of satisfaction felt by the commissioners of his works when they received the finished product; Avicenna, however, certainly knew about it. Glimpses of such reactions we get, for example, from the attitude of one of his closest disciples, Jūzjānī, upon seeing the completed Cure. As discussed in Chapter 2 (W6), it seems obvious that he was not entirely pleased with it, in the sense that it did not meet his preconceived idea of what a commentary, or—be it—even an exposition of Aristotle's works ought to have been. In this connection we should not forget that as Avicenna's attitude toward Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition was evolving and he developed an increasingly independent attitude toward it, we cannot expect his disciples and followers, let alone his calumniators or opponents, to have doffed ingrained attitudes of servility and slavish imitation of Aristotelian models. The opposition to Avicenna's neoteristic approach must have therefore been considerable even from his more attached disciples, as is evident from numerous passages of Avicenna himself where he expresses his impatience with such people. It was only his stature and renown that enabled him to continue working along these lines, and the personal cult surrounding him that arose early and was followed by those not so strongly attached to the Aristotelian tradition, that ensured the propagation and survival of his works.

Another indication of a reaction to a commissioned piece is provided by the possibly apocryphal story that ‘Alā’-ad-Dawla himself, his great protector and patron, understood nothing from the Philosophy which Avicenna condescended to write in Persian for his very edification.¹

Considerations such as these, along with Avicenna's deep appreciation of the contextuality of the philosophical praxis (Chapter 5.2, 5.3), made him think seriously about the manner in which he was going to write his works

¹ Achena and Massé 19.