AVERROES’ SEARCH: DANTE’S MODERNISM AND JOYCE

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The paper uses Borges’s short story “Averroes’ Search” to look at a Modernist appropriation of Averroes and compare it with the references to Averroes in Ulysses. Averroes is chosen as the Islamic philosopher of the medieval period, whose writings became the basis of a “radical Aristotelianism” in Paris and elsewhere in Europe in the thirteenth century. Averroism’s “double truth” and failure to synthesise different forms of thinking, felt to be inconsistent with Christianity, was condemned in 1270 and 1277, but still finds marginal expression in Dante’s work, affording reason for questioning his orthodoxy. The paper explores ways in which Averroistic details in Dante break down the single hierarchical system of thought that runs through the Commedia, and links that with the melancholia of the modern, who, according to Benjamin, knows that there are no whole systems of thought with which to work. The paper asks what implications Averroes’ work has for Joyce, and examines his failure, in his “search” to know what comedy might be. The non-totalising elements of comedy, and comedy as the failure of a system of thought to form a complete book have implications for both Dante and Joyce, and they show up a fundamental dichotomy in Averroes: that the man who troubles systematicity in Christianity is nonetheless committed to it in his own belief in philosophy.

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Averroes is the subject of “La busca de Averroes”, a short story by Borges (Ficciones, 1944 [the search for Averroes, or the search by Averroes]). In Borges, Averroes, because he is separated from Aristotle by fourteen centuries and only reads him in the translation of a translation, is searching to know what the Poetics mean by
“tragedy” and “comedy”, unable to imagine because he has no concept of drama. Borges’s search is the attempt to visualise a specific knowledge when there is no language into which that knowledge could be conceptualised, and it is paradigmatic for anyone trying to understand how one writer responds or might have responded to another. So with Joyce and Dante, despite Mary Reynolds’s book, there is still everything to say. To a late twentieth-century reader, familiar with the critical debates on Dante associated with Bruno Nardi, Auerbach, Singleton or Frec-cero, it is impossible to say how an early twentieth-century reader like the “Joyce” of whichever Joycean text we mean would have read Dante as he could be read in the early twentieth-century. The question of influence is not a matter of working out how two determinate authors can be put against each other; more a matter of seeing how texts work in history and how they must be understood differently from one historical moment to another.

Yet there are common moments which might be understood in terms of the common application of a trope: in this case, the trope associated with the modern. Dante’s sense of the modern, I argue, is inseparable from awareness of the split nature of the subject and the split, non-unified nature of the hierarchical scheme which is the basis of the text. If we think of Joyce in relation to the “middayevil”, that would evoke, amongst other things, “the demon at noontide” – which is the spirit of melancholy, which most

