

## The Myth of the Framework in Borges's "Averroes' Search"

---

“Context,” “framework,” “conceptual scheme,” “scheme of description,” “paradigm.” These terms emerge throughout much of twentieth-century philosophy of language and science. Sometimes they appear in connection to reference, as in Quine’s discussion of the translation of the alien word “gavagai,” which, relative to one context, refers, say, to undetached rabbit-parts, while relative to a different context, it refers, say, to temporal slices of rabbithood (35). Sometimes they appear in connection to theory change and incommensurability, as in Thomas Kuhn’s claim that comprehensive scientific theories – what he calls *paradigms* – share no concepts or meanings and are thus incommensurable; for example, the terms “mass” and “gravitation” in Newton’s classical physics cannot be equated with the same terms in Einstein’s relativistic paradigm (114; 117). Importantly, on these accounts there is no room for an all-encompassing super-context in which all disparate theories, paradigms, or conceptual schemes can be adequately translated. Rather there is a plurality of conceptual schemes, frameworks, paradigms. And this plurality constitutes a “context” in which Borges’s “Averroes’ Search” acquires special interest. Inspired by Floyd Merrell’s connection of Borges’s story to Kuhn’s and the other radical philosophers’ version of incommensurability (220-23), I shall unravel here some of the threads of Borges’s story that are interwoven both with the more general notion of context as well as the more specific notions of conceptual scheme, framework, or paradigm.

### 1. Missed Clues

Averroes is working on his commentary on Aristotle, “the monumental work which would justify him in the eyes of men” (*Labyrinths* 149)<sup>1</sup>. It

---

<sup>1</sup> “la obra monumental que lo justificaría ante las gentes” (OC 1: 582).

is an impressive work indeed and more so if we consider both that Averroes is dealing with the thoughts of a man who is separated from him by fourteen centuries and that, ignorant of Syriac and Greek, he is working with the translation of a translation. Understandably, two incomprehensible words are halting him at the beginning of the *Poetics*: “tragedy” and “comedy.” In fact two clues to the solution of his problem are offered to Averroes, but he is unable to recognize them as such and thus make sense of them. The first clue has to do with some children playing in the street. Averroes is disturbed by some noise coming from outside. Below, on the patio, a group of half-naked boys are playing. One is playing the part of the muezzin and stands on the shoulders of another one, who, holding the former motionlessly, is playing the part of a minaret. A third child, on his knees, represents the crowd of faithful worshippers. Averroes only glances at this scene and goes back to his books, trying to understand what the terms “tragedy” and “comedy” mean. The second clue is offered to Averroes at the Koranist Farach’s place. The merchant Abulcasim, who has just come back from remote countries, is urged by some of Farach’s guests to relate some marvel. Abulcasim tells a strange story about something he has seen in Sin Kalan (Canton): a house of painted wood, with rows of balconies on top of each other and, on the balconies, people eating and drinking. This strange house had also a terrace, also crowded with people. Some of the people on the terrace were playing the drum and the lute while others, approximately fifteen or twenty, wearing masks, were praying, singing, and conversing. “They suffered prison, but no one could see the jail,” Abulcasim describes, “they traveled on horseback, but no one could see the horse; they fought, but the swords were of reed; they died and then stood up again” (*Labyrinths* 152).<sup>2</sup> Farach thinks that those people had to be crazy, but Abulcasim assures that they were not. No one understands, and Abulcasim explains: “Let us imagine that someone is [demonstrating/displaying] a story instead of telling it. Let that story be the one about the sleepers of Ephesus. We see them retire into the cavern, we see them pray and sleep, we see them sleep with their eyes open, we see them grow as they sleep, we see them awaken after three hundred and nine years, we see them give the merchant an ancient coin, we see them awaken in Paradise, we see them awaken with the dog. Something like this was shown to us that after-

---

<sup>2</sup> “Padecían prisiones, y nadie veía la cárcel; cabalgaban, pero no se percibía el caballo; combatían, pero las espadas eran de caña; morían y después estaban de pie” (OC 1: 585).

noon by the people of the terrace" (*Labyrinths* 152).<sup>3</sup> Farach wants to know further if those people spoke. Since Abulcasim says that they did speak, Farach arrives at the conclusion that "twenty persons are unnecessary. One single speaker can tell anything, no matter how complicated it might be" (*Labyrinths* 152-3).<sup>4</sup> Everybody approves his dictum and celebrates the "virtues" of their language and own culture. Indeed Averroes might have used these two episodes as "devices" to delineate the way Aristotle is employing those strange words, "tragedy" and "comedy," in the *Poetics*. However, the Arab philosopher fails in taking advantage of them and arriving at a translation. Why?

Perhaps a clue to the solution of this question may be found in another of Borges's stories, "*Deutsches Requiem*" (1949), which presents some parallels with "Averroes' Search." At first reading, "*Deutsches Requiem*" may be regarded as a presentation of a stereotypical Nazi mentality, with its glorification of violence and irrationalism. However, the story is not restricted to the portrayal of a violent and irrational world. Indeed a clue for a different interpretation can be found in the editor's reference to one of zur Linde's ancestors, an ancestor who zur Linde in fact omits from the recollection of his forbears: a theologian and hebraist named Johannes Forkel. The mention of the theologian, along with the reference to Job in the epigraph, suggests a religious context within the story. Moreover, the comparison of the rise of Nazism with the emergence of Christianity and Islam in terms of its demand of a "new kind of man" (*Labyrinths* 143)<sup>5</sup> strengthens the religious dimension of the story. Indeed zur Linde himself understands Nazism as a religion demanding the self-repression of his individuality. Perhaps the place where this understanding comes better to light is in zur Linde's own

---

<sup>3</sup> "—Imaginemos que alguien muestra una historia en vez de referirla. Sea esa historia la de los durmientes de Éfeso. Los vemos retirarse a la caverna, los vemos orar y dormir, los vemos dormir con los ojos abiertos, los vemos crecer mientras duermen, los vemos despertar a la vuelta de trescientos nueve años, los vemos entregar al vendedor una antigua moneda, los vemos despertar en el paraíso, los vemos despertar con el perro. Algo así nos mostraron aquella tarde las personas de la terraza" (OC 1: 585).

<sup>4</sup> "—En tal caso —dijo Farach— no se requerían veinte personas. Un solo hablata puede referir cualquier cosa, por compleja que sea" (OC 1: 585).

<sup>5</sup> "Comprendí, sin embargo, que estábamos al borde de un tiempo nuevo y que ese tiempo, comparable a las épocas iniciales del Islam o del Cristianismo, exigía hombres nuevos" (OC 1: 577).

description of his tasks as a subdirector of a concentration camp. Zur Linde asserts:

The carrying out of this task was not pleasant, but I was never negligent. The coward proves to his mettle under fire; the *merciful*, the *pious*, seeks his trial in jails and in the *suffering* of others. Essentially, Nazism is an act of morality, a *purging of corrupted humanity*, to *dress anew*. This transformation is common in battle, amidst the clamor of the captains and the shouting; such is not the case in a wretched cell, where insidious deceitful *mercy* *tempts* us with ancient tenderness. Not in vain do I pen this word: for the superior man of Zarathustra, mercy is the greatest of *sins*. (*Labyrinth* 144; my italics)<sup>6</sup>

As Donald Shaw argues, zur Linde embraces Nazism “as a counter-religion to Christianity”; he is an “inverted saint and martyr,” mortifying and attempting to overcome “what is good in his nature, just as other men had dedicated themselves selflessly to the holy life” (125). For zur Linde, “the world was dying of Judaism and from that sickness of Judaism, the faith of Jesus”; Nazism, in turn, taught that vanishing world “violence and the faith of the sword” (*Labyrinth* 146).<sup>7</sup> At this point the irony of zur Linde’s case becomes clear. Zur Linde acts under the conviction that the goal of Nazism consists in destroying Christian faith and its values under the promise of a “new order.” However, zur Linde’s Nazism is still caught in the Christian “paradigm” that it sought to replace. Thus, zur Linde speaks of “faith,” “sin,” “compassion,” “mercy,” and “temptation” and explicitly identifies Nazism with religion when he claims that “to die for a religion is easier than to live it absolutely” (*Labyrinths* 144).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, like Christianity, zur Linde’s Nazism presupposes a teleological picture of history. Accordingly, zur Linde believes that there is an underlying purposiveness running through history that inexorably leads to Nazism (*Labyrinths* 147). And like Christianity, zur Linde’s account of Nazism as a teleo-

---

<sup>6</sup> “El ejercicio de ese cargo no me fue grato; pero no pequé nunca de negligencia. El cobarde se prueba entre las espadas; el misericordioso, el piadoso, busca el examen de las cárceles y del dolor ajeno. El nazismo, intrínsecamente, es un hecho moral, un despojarse del viejo hombre, que está viciado, para vestir el nuevo. En la batalla esa mutación es común, entre el clamor de los capitanes y el vocerío; no así en un torpe calabozo, donde nos tienta con antiguas ternuras la insidiosa piedad. No en vano escribo esa palabra; la piedad por el hombre superior es el último pecado de Zarathustra” (*OC* 1: 578).

<sup>7</sup> “El mundo se moría de judaísmo y de esa enfermedad del judaísmo, que es la fe de Jesús; nosotros le enseñamos la violencia y la fe de la espada” (*OC* 1: 580).

<sup>8</sup> “Morir por una religión es más simple que vivirla con plenitud” (*OC* 1: 578).

logical narrative encourages ways of human behaviour while discouraging others. Therefore, zur Linde must repress feelings such as mercy or compassion, and nourish, instead, violence, murder, and destruction. And it is within this religious context that zur Linde's statement about the way he will act when standing face to face with death acquires its full meaning. Zur Linde claims: "My flesh may be afraid; I am not" (*Labyrinths* 147).<sup>9</sup> This separation of body and mind contained in zur Linde's final statement is indeed the best proof that zur Linde's Nazism cannot abandon the Platonic-Christian categories of the conceptual scheme that it is meant to overthrow. And at this point the connection between the protagonists of "*Deutsches Requiem*" and "*Averroes' Search*" becomes also clear. Thus, just as zur Linde is confined within the boundaries of a Platonic-Christian framework, Averroes seems to be insensitive to beliefs and modes of thinking different from his own. However, the question arises as to whether the reason for Averroes' failure in acknowledging the clues offered to him and come up with a translation for those mysterious Greek words is perhaps more radical than one might expect. Before we turn to that reason, however, there is an important episode that I want to discuss: the old-new metaphor controversy that takes place at Farach's.

## 2. *The Old-New Metaphor Debate*

Abdalmalik, one of Farach's guests, argues for creating new metaphors. He gives as an example a metaphor by Zuhair where the poet claims that "in the course of eighty years of suffering and glory many times he has seen destiny suddenly trample men into the dust, like a blind camel" (*Labyrinths* 153).<sup>10</sup> Abdalmalik's point is that the metaphor of the blind camel has ceased to be effective. Although he admits that at the time Zuhair compared destiny to a blind camel such a figure might have moved people, he certainly believes that "five centuries of admiration have rendered it valueless" (*Labyrinths* 153).<sup>11</sup> Everyone approves Abdalmalik's dictum. Averroes, however, rejects this position. He admits that he used to share Abdalmalik's view, but he does not accord with it any more.

---

<sup>9</sup> "Mi carne puede tener miedo; yo, no" (OC 1: 581).

<sup>10</sup> " (...) en el decurso de ochenta años de dolor y de gloria, ha visto muchas veces al destino atropellar de golpe a los hombres, como un camello ciego" (OC 1: 586).

<sup>11</sup> " (...) cinco siglos de admiración la habían gastado" (OC 1: 586).

The old-new metaphor debate appears also in Borges's story "The Other" (1975). This story is about the encounter of a seventy-year-old Borges, who is sitting on a bench facing the Charles River, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with a younger Borges, who is sitting at the other end of the same bench but facing the Rhone, in Geneva, Switzerland. Through information that only Borges can possess, the seventy-year-old Borges tries to convince the younger one that he is also Borges. At one point, the conversation inevitably revolves around literature. And the two positions represented in "Averroes' Search" by Abdalmalik and Averroes reappear in "The Other." Thus, the older Borges, like Averroes, supports the creation of those metaphors "that correspond to intimate and obvious affinities and that our imagination has already accepted. Old age and sunset, dreams and life, the flow of time and water," while the younger Borges, like Abadalmalik, believes in the "invention, or discovery, of new metaphors" (*A Reader* 324).<sup>12</sup>

The defense of new metaphors was indeed put forward by Borges in his avant-gardist stage. In 1919, Borges went to Spain and associated himself with the Ultraist circles of Seville and Madrid (for an account of Borges's participation in this movement see Strong, Videla, and Wentzlaff-Eggebert). Radical new metaphors stand in the center of interest of Ultraism. Thus, according to the Ultraist Borges, metaphors point to previously unremarked aspects of reality ("visión inédita de algún fragmento de la vida" Borges "*Ultraísmo*": 289). In other words, for Borges, metaphors disclose new dimensions of a pre-predicative reality. In this sense, Niggstich correctly claims that for the Ultraist Borges, metaphors are in the last instance critique of language (75) insofar as they put the habitual ontology of our world-view at risk (for an account of the connection between Borges's Ultraist view of metaphor and Fritz Mauthner's critique of language see Dapía *Rezeption*: 111-114).

Yet Averroes displays three arguments to demonstrate why the position represented by Abdalmalik (as well as by both the younger Borges in "The Other" and the Ultraist Borges in reality) is false. First, he questions Abdalmalik's assumption that the purpose of a poem is to surprise its reader. For, if it were so, then a poem's life span would be measured in hours or perhaps in minutes. Second, Averroes claims that

---

<sup>12</sup> "Mi *alter ego* creía en la invención o descubrimiento de metáforas nuevas; yo en las que corresponden a afinidades íntimas y notorias y que nuestra imaginación ya ha aceptado. La vejez de los hombres y el ocaso, los sueños y la vida, el correr del tiempo y del agua" (*OC* 3: 14).

everything may be connected to everything else so that the real merit of a poet rests less in the invention of such a connection than in discovering a truth that no one can elude. Accordingly, Averroes claims that all literature that continues to be interesting over time refers to truths about essential human experiences. And because it continues to point to a certain truth of human experience, the metaphor of the blind camel, Averroes claims, still speaks to its readers. For, Averroes argues, "there is no one who has not felt at some time that destiny is clumsy and powerful, that it is innocent and also inhuman. For that conviction, which may be passing or continuous, but which no one may elude, Zuhair's verse was written. What was said there will not be said better" (*Labyrinths* 154).<sup>13</sup> But it is Averroes' third argument, as he himself acknowledges, that is "the essential part" of his reflection:

Time, which despoils castles, enriches verses. Zuhair's verse, when he composed it in Arabia, served to confront two images, the old camel and destiny; when we repeat it now, it serves to evoke the memory of Zuhair and to fuse our misfortune with that dead Arab's. The figure had two terms then and now it has four. Time broadens the scope of verses and I know of some which, like music, are everything for all men. (*Labyrinths* 154)<sup>14</sup>

Averroes is now affirming that what keeps Zuhair's or any poem alive is the possibility that its original meaning extends its scope. With a help of a second example, Averroes tries to make his point clear. He states:

When I was tormented years ago in Marrakesh by memories of Cordova, I took pleasure in repeating the apostrophe Abdurrahman addressed in the gardens of Ruzafa to an African palm:

*You too, oh palm!, are  
Foreign to this soil...*

---

<sup>13</sup> "(...). nadie no sintió alguna vez que el destino es fuerte y es torpe, que es inocente y es también inhumano. Para esa convicción, que puede ser pasajera o continua, pero que nadie elude, fue escrito el verso de Zuhair. No se dirá mejor lo que allí se dijo" (OC 1: 586).

<sup>14</sup> "(...) el tiempo, que despoja los alcázares, enriquece los versos. El de Zuhair, cuando éste lo compuso en Arabia, sirvió para confrontar dos imágenes, la del viejo camello y la del destino: repetido ahora, sirve para memoria de Zuhair y para confundir nuestros pesares con los de aquél árabe muerto. Dos términos tenía la figura y hoy tiene cuatro. El tiempo agranda el ámbito de los versos y sé de algunos que a la par de la música, son todo para todos los hombres" (OC 1: 586).

The singular benefit of poetry: words composed by a king who longed for the Orient served me, exiled in Africa, to express my nostalgia for Spain. (*Labyrinths* 154)<sup>15</sup>

What Averroes regards as a valuable metaphor is one that, like Abdurrahman's palm, can be detached from its original context (a king's longing for the Orient) and inserted into other contexts (Averroes's nostalgia for Spain). In other words, in Averroes's view, the value of a metaphor is always *relative to its possibility of insertion in other contexts beyond the context of production*. Conceived by and for a king who longed for the Orient, Abdurrahman's image of the palm can still acquire meaning in and through many other contexts such as the one opened by Averroes' nostalgia for Spain. And it is its capacity to acquire new meanings in different contexts that constitutes the proof that it is a valuable metaphor. Hence, the value of a metaphor does not lie in its novelty and capacity to disclose new aspects of reality—as Abdalmalik believes and Borges used to think when he was part of the Ultraist movement—but rather in its potential to extend its meaning by being placed in and interacting with different contexts. (For an account of the role played by context in Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" see Dapía "Pierre Menard in Context.")

Similarly, context plays a decisive role in connection to the enigmatic Aristotelian words. The terms "tragedy" and "comedy" refer to two distinct concepts of theatrical representation only *relative to the context of Aristotle's Greek culture*, while *relative to Averroes' Arab cultural context*, which does not acknowledge a performative event among its objects, they remain meaningless. Indeed Borges's emphasis on the phenomenon of *context* comes close to the stance taken by many philosophers of language and science who stress the role played by diverse kinds of context such as conceptual schemes, theories, paradigms, and frameworks in our attempts to make sense of the world. However, the question arises as to whether Borges' "Averroes' Search" illustrates what Karl Popper calls the "myth of the framework," namely, the conviction that we are enclosed in the prison-house of the conceptual schemes of our languages, cultures, or theories, and we are presumably so caught in these intellectual frameworks that we are unable to communicate

---

<sup>15</sup> "Así, atormentado hace años en Marrakesh por memoria de Córdoba, me complacía en repetir el apóstrofe que Abdurrahmán dirigió en los jardines de Ruzafa a una palma africana: *Tú también eres, joh palma!, / en este suelo extranjera ...*" Singular beneficio de la poesía; palabras redactadas por un rey que anhelaba el Oriente me sirvieron a mí, desterrado en África, para mi nostalgia de España" (OC 1: 586-87).



with those who do not share them (35). Furthermore, those different frameworks (languages, cultures, or theories) are said to be *incommensurable* because they are regarded to be about "different worlds" (or the world conceived in entirely different ways; Kuhn 117). Certainly, Borges speaks of "incommensurable" worlds when he refers to the divine and the human worlds. Thus, in "Burak," a text closely related to "The Secret Miracle," Borges claims:

In George Sale's translation (1734), the opening verse of Chapter XVII of the Koran consists of these words: "Praise be unto him, who transported his servant by night, from the sacred temple of Mecca to his farther temple of Jerusalem, the circuit of which we have blessed, that we might show him some of our signs...." Commentators say that the one praised is God, that his servant is Mohammed, that the sacred temple is that of Mecca, that the distant temple is that of Jerusalem, and that from Jerusalem the Prophet was transported to the seventh heaven. In the oldest versions of the legend, Mohammed is guided by a man or an angel; in those of a later date he is furnished with a heavenly steed, larger than an ass and smaller than a mule. This steed is Burak, whose name means "shinning." According to Richard Burton, the translator of *The Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night*, Moslems in India usually picture Burak with a man's face, the ears of an ass, a horse's body, and the wings and tail of peacock.

One of the Islamic legends tells that Burak, on leaving the ground, tipped a jar of water. The Prophet was taken up to the heavens with the patriarchs and angels living there, and he crossed the Unity and felt a coldness that chilled his heart when the Lord laid a hand on his shoulder. *Man's time is not commensurate with God's time*; on his return the Prophet raised the jar, out of which not a single drop had yet been spilled. (*The Book of Imaginary Beings* 49-50; italics are mine).<sup>16</sup>

Yet the question arises as to whether the incommensurability thesis holds also true for Borges's "Averroes Search." Does this thesis account for Averroes' failure in finding an adequate translation for those two enigmatic Greek words? If we apply the incommensurability thesis or myth of the framework to Borges's story, we might claim that, with every culture imprisoned in its own conceptual scheme, the terms "tragedy" and "comedy" used in fourth-century (B.C.) Greek culture cannot possibly be equated in meaning or reference with any term or expression of Averroes' twelfth-century Arab culture. However, this seems to be a hasty conclusion, for there are other aspects of Borges's story that clearly contradict this interpretation. Thus, Abulcasim's *de-*

---

<sup>16</sup> (However the differences between the Spanish text and the English translation, which was done with collaboration of the author, the idea of "incommensurability" appears in both texts.)

*scription* of the theatrical performance he has attended in China is a proof that the two cultures in question are not incommensurable or, as Popper would put it, that they are not imprisoned in their own conceptual schemes. For to say that the Greek notion of theatre is incommensurable with any terms or expressions of twelfth-century Arab culture and nevertheless be able to *describe* it as Abulcasim does, is totally incoherent.

However, it is still possible that Borges's "Averroes' Search" illustrates Popper's "myth of the framework" only that the frameworks involved were not the fourth-century (B.C.) Greek and twelfth-century Arab cultures but a Platonic conceptual scheme as opposed to an Aristotelian paradigm. Let's consider this possible interpretation. Indeed the Platonic-Aristotelian opposition reverberates throughout Borges's work. The narrator of "*Deutsches Requiem*," for example, presents the opposition as follows: "It has been said that every man is born an Aristotelian or a Platonist. This is the same as saying that every abstract contention has its counterpart in the polemics of Aristotle or Plato; across the centuries and latitudes, the names, the faces and dialects change but not the eternal antagonists" (*Labyrinths* 146).<sup>17</sup> Again, in two essays, "From Allegories to Novels" and "The Nightingale of Keats," Borges engages with the Platonist-Aristotelian opposition, which he attributes to Coleridge. The Platonist, in Borges's view, regards abstract concepts, general categories, classes, and orders as realities and language as "the map of the universe." The Aristotelian, in turn, does not concede such an ontological status to those abstract concepts or classifications but regards them as mere generalizations and language as "nothing but a system of arbitrary symbols." Furthermore, Borges claims that while the Platonist believes that the universe is "somehow a cosmos, an order," the Aristotelian does not discard the possibility that it is just "an error or a figment of our partial knowledge" (*Other Inquisitions* 156, 123; *OC* 2: 96, 123). Ultimately, Borges identifies the Platonist-Aristotelian opposition with the realist-nominalist debate: while "for realism the universals (Plato would say the ideas, forms; we call them abstract concepts)" are fundamental, for nominalism, the important things are the individuals (*Other Inquisitions* 156; *OC* 1: 123-24). The arrangement of entities into general concepts is thus, for the nominalist,

---

<sup>17</sup> "Se ha dicho que todos los hombres nacen aristotélicos o platónicos. Ello equivale a declarar que no hay debate de carácter abstracto que no sea un momento de la polémica de Aristóteles y Platón; a través de los siglos y latitudes, cambian los nombres, los dialectos, las caras, pero no los eternos antagonistas" (*OC* 1: 580).

arbitrary, with no foundation in the individual entities themselves (for an account of Borges's nominalism see the excellent book by Jaime Rest).

Indeed Averroes' Platonic tendency towards abstract concepts as opposed to particulars or individual entities is revealed at the beginning of the story. Thus, in a minor work that he is in the process of writing, Averroes dissents with the Aristotelian position inasmuch as for the Arab philosopher, (divine) knowledge is concerned with "general laws of the universe, those pertaining to the species, not to the individual" (*Labyrinths* 148).<sup>18</sup> Again, his distance from an Aristotelian way of perceiving reality becomes evident in his conception of the Koran as a Platonic idea ("Averroes, who had written a commentary on the *Republic*, could have said that the mother of the Book is something like its Platonic model", *Labyrinths* 151).<sup>19</sup> Admittedly, discovering a "translation manual" that provides interpretation for Aristotle's concepts of "tragedy" and "comedy" is going to be more difficult for Averroes, whose thought clearly moves along Platonic lines, than, say, for an Aristotelian-minded individual. Yet his task is, in principle, possible. However different Platonic conceptions are from Aristotle's, it is theoretically possible for Averroes to find out a meaning-preserving translation for Aristotle's words, provided Averroes becomes aware that he is living in a closed Platonic framework and wishes to break out of it. For, although frameworks are indispensable to orientate ourselves in the world, we should not become "addicted" to any particular framework, in Popper's excellent phrase (53).

The point I am making becomes clearer when we focus on Borges's (the narrator's) final reflection on the process of writing this story. Borges (the narrator) claims: "I felt that the work was mocking me. I felt that Averroes, wanting to imagine what a drama is without ever having suspected what a theater is, was no more absurd than I, wanting to imagine Averroes with no other sources than a few fragments from Renan, Lane, and Asín Palacios" (*Labyrinths* 155).<sup>20</sup> And yet... Borges,

---

<sup>18</sup> "(...). la divinidad sólo conoce las leyes generales del universo, lo concerniente a las especies, no al individuo" (OC 1: 582).

<sup>19</sup> "Averroes, que había comentado la *República*, pudo haber dicho que la madre del Libro es algo así como su modelo platónico" (OC 1: 584).

<sup>20</sup> "Sentí que la obra se burlaba de mí. Sentí que Averroes, queriendo imaginar lo que es un drama sin haber sospechado lo que es un teatro, no era más absurdo que yo, queriendo imaginar a Averroes, sin otro material que unos adarmes de Renan, de Lane y de Asín Palacios" (OC 1: 588).

who moreover defines himself as an Aristotelian (Christ 288), successfully describes Averroes' Platonic mentality, just as Abulcasim manages to describe a theatrical representation. In the same way, if Averroes had let himself be shaken in his closed world of adopted views by Abulcasim's description of his bizarre experience in the Chinese woodhouse, the Arab philosopher would have been in better shape to equate the Greek concepts of "tragedy" and "comedy" to the Arab concept of "story." Moreover, he might have added a special gloss, as Abulcasim himself does, to delimit the particular way in which the Arab word for "story" should be understood in the context of Aristotle's *Poetics*, a gloss such as "that is displayed or showed instead of told." Or, associating Abulcasim's description, in retrospect, with the children and their playing, the gloss might have been something along the lines of "[a story] played instead of told as children do when they are playing the part of a muezzin, minaret or whatever it is that they may be playing the part of." As the narrator's process of reconstructing Averroes' experience testifies, we are still mutually intelligible beings whatever our cultural differences. Yet Averroes has let himself become so "addicted" to the Platonic conceptual scheme that the latter has turned into an impenetrable prison. In this respect, "Averroes' Search" is the counterpart of Borges's "Funes the Memoriosus."

"Funes the Memoriosus" is about the amazing ability both to perceive the world in its slightest detail and to remember those perceptions, an ability acquired by a young Uruguayan named Ireneo Funes after being thrown to the ground by a horse. "We, at one glance, can perceive three glasses on a table," claims the narrator, "Funes, all the leaves and tendrils and fruit that make up a grape vine" (*Labyrinths* 63).<sup>21</sup> After the accident with the horse, Funes is left hopelessly paralyzed. However, Funes believes that his immobility is a minimum price to pay for both his "infallible" perception and memory.

Before that rainy afternoon when the blue-gray horse threw him, he had been what all humans are: blind, deaf, addlebrained, absent-minded. (...) For nineteen years he had lived as one in a dream: he looked without seeing, listened without hearing, forgetting everything, almost everything. When he fell, he became unconscious; when he came to, the

---

<sup>21</sup> "Nosotros, de un vistazo, percibimos tres copas en una mesa; Funes, todos los vástagos y racimos y frutos que comprende una parra" (OC 1: 488).

present was almost intolerable in its richness and sharpness, as were his most distant and trivial memories. (*Labyrinths* 63; *OC* 1: 488)

Indeed Funes inhabits an Aristotelian-nominalist world, a world of particulars or individuals, with very little room for abstract concepts (for, it is impossible to inhabit a world of *pure* sensory experiences; at some level one's experience must be brought under concepts). Yet the question arises as to what kind of language would accommodate Funes's nominalist world. Adequate representations of things conceived as individuals would be achieved only in a language in which a name corresponds to each singular entity, a "language in which each individual thing, each stone, each bird and each branch, would have its own name" (*Labyrinths* 65; *OC* 1: 489). Indeed this is the argument advanced by Locke in the seventeenth century. And it corresponds also to Funes's situation. However, Funes refuses to construct such a language because it seems to him to be "too general," "too ambiguous" (*Labyrinths* 65; *OC* 1: 489). For Funes, each single entity perceived under different angles or perspectives becomes a manifold of totally different entities. For this reason, Funes could not accept the use of the same concept, say, the concept of dog, as embracing the many perspectives under which a dog can be shown, perspectives which are equivalent to so many individuals. "It bothered him," comments the narrator, "that the dog at three fourteen (seen from the side) should have the same name as the dog at three fifteen (seen from the front)" (*Labyrinths* 65).<sup>22</sup> Thus, Funes's supernominalist language would require words not only for each particular entity but for each particular perspective under which a given entity might be looked at.

Locke disavows a language in which "every particular thing should have a distinct peculiar name," offering three reasons. First, Locke argues that such a language is humanly impossible for the simple reason that we are not able to frame and retain ideas of all the particular things that we might encounter; "every bird and beast men saw, every tree and plant that affected the senses could not find a place in the most capacious understanding" (2: 15). In this respect, however, Funes's memory defies Locke, for Funes "remembered not only every leaf

---

<sup>22</sup> "(...) le molestaba que el perro de las tres y catorce (visto de perfil) tuviera el mismo nombre que el perro de las tres y cuarto (visto de frente)" (*OC* 1: 489).

of every tree of every wood, but also every time he had perceived or imagined it" (*Labyrinths* 65).<sup>23</sup>

Second, Locke claims that if such a language were possible, still it would be of no use for communication, for my words "could not be significant or intelligible to another who was not acquainted with all those very particular things which had fallen under my notice" (2: 16). Once again, Funes comes close to illustrating Locke's point. For if based on the classification of all the memories of his childhood, Funes had succeeded in constructing the language he projected, nobody would have been able to understand such a language, which would have always remained a "private" language.

Third, Locke argues that a language in which a distinct name is assigned to every particular thing "would not be of any great use for the improvement of knowledge" (2: 16). This point is also made by the narrator when he refers to Funes's invention of a system of numbering in which "in place of seven thousand thirteen, he would say (for example) *Máximo Pérez*; in place of seven thousand fourteen, *The Railroad*; other numbers were *Luis Melián Lafinur*, *Olimar*, *sulphur*, *the reins*, *the whale*, *the gas*, *the caldron*, *Napoleon*, *Agustín de Vedia*" (*Labyrinths* 64).<sup>24</sup> Borges (the narrator) tries (in vain) to explain to Funes that "this rhapsody of incoherent terms was precisely the opposite of a system of numbers," that "saying 365 meant saying three hundreds, six tens, five ones, an analysis which is not found in the "numbers" *The Negro Timoteo* or *meat blanket*." (*Labyrinths* 65)<sup>25</sup>

The story casts doubts on the efficacy of infinite perception, for it does not prove to be very useful if it is not accompanied by the ability to think, that is to say, to deal with abstract concepts. "I suspect, however," the narrator claims, "that [Funes] was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions. In the teeming world of Funes, there were only details, almost

<sup>23</sup> "(...). Funes no sólo recordaba cada hoja de cada árbol de cada monte, sino cada una de las veces que la había percibido o imaginado" (OC 1: 489).

<sup>24</sup> "En lugar de siete mil trece, decía (por ejemplo) *Máximo Pérez*; en lugar de siete mil catorce, *El Ferrocarril*; otros números eran *Luis Melián Lafinur*, *Olimar*, *azufre*, *los bastos*, *la ballena*, *el gas*, *la caldera*, *Napoleón*, *Agustín de Vedia*" (OC 1: 489).

<sup>25</sup> "Yo traté de explicarle que esa rapsodia de voces inconexas era precisamente lo contrario de un sistema de numeración. Le dije que decir 365 era decir tres centenas, seis decenas, cinco unidades: análisis que no existe en los "números" *El Negro Timoteo* o *manta de carne*" (OC 1: 489).

immediate in their presence" (*Labyrinths* 66; *OC* 1: 490). Significantly, the narrator depicts Funes as a "perpetual prisoner" (*Labyrinths* 61; "eterno prisionero", *OC* 1: 486). And indeed he is a prisoner of his infinite perceptions and memory. Funes is imprisoned in a closed Aristotelian-nominalist framework, just as Averroes is a prisoner of a Platonic conceptual scheme.

**1. A Successful Translation Manual has been found: A Comparison with Mauthner's "The Theater and the Dalai Lama"**

Interesting in view of our interpretation of Borges's "Averroes' Search," there is a text by Fritz Mauthner, entitled "The Theater and the Dalai Lama," which shows amazing parallels with Borges's story. "The Theater and the Dalai Lama" revolves around the report about "one of the many Western institutions," the theatre, given by the trusted man of the Dalai Lama of Tibet after two months of exhausting attendance at the theatres of the principal European cities. The narrator claims:

It was soon after the war between the czar and the mikado. The Asian nations believed that an Oriental country had shown its superiority over a Western one. And with ancestral wisdom, the nations of Asia began to imitate the Japanese and sent trusted men (it is not certain whether the Indochinese word would be better translated as "ambassador" or "spy") who had to describe faithfully what they had seen in our countries. Afterwards their governments could make an assessment, adopt the good things of Western culture, and avoid the bad ones.

Perhaps I will someday learn and tell what was said in the reports about our physicians and priests, about our schools and barracks, about our marriages and dwellings, about our books and parliaments. Today, I can only tell how one ambassador or spy informed the Dalai Lama of Tibet about one of the many Western institutions. About our theater. (12)<sup>26</sup>

Thus, like Borges's Averroes, the Dalai Lama's envoy has to find a translation scheme that allows him to equate the term "theatre" as used in the Western world with any terms or expressions of his own culture. However, in Mauthner's, as in Borges's, the problem of finding a "translation manual" is not restricted to the protagonist. In fact, Mauthner's Western narrator, like Borges (the narrator of "Averroes' Search"), mirrors the problem of his character. And just as Borges (the

---

<sup>26</sup> The translations from German into English are mine.

narrator) attempts at figuring out, with only the help of some Western sources, the thoughts of an Arab philosopher separated from him by eight centuries, Mauthner's presumably German narrator wonders about the adequate translation into German of the original Indochinese word applied to the Asian envoy. Should this Indochinese word be translated as "ambassador" (*Botschafter*), or is "spy" (*Kundschafter*) a better rendition of the original?

However, unlike Borges's Averroes, the Dalai Lama's trusted man has seen a Western theatrical representation—in fact, he claims that he has visited "to the point of fatigue the theaters of London and Paris, of Berlin and Rome, of Vienna and Bayreuth, daily for two years" (13). In this respect, he may be compared with Borges's Abulcasim. Thus, just as Abulcasim explains what a theatrical performance is by equating it to the conceptualization of story provided by his cultural framework, carefully adding that it is not a story *told* by one single speaker but a story *demonstrated* by several people, the Dalai Lama's trusted man sees the Western institution through his own culture's conceptualization of theatre, particularly through the eminently *religious or ritual* character of the Oriental theatre as well as through its emphasis on *dance drama* (on Oriental theatre see Wickham: 21-30). Thus, in view of the religious character of the Oriental theatre, it is not surprising that the Asian envoy speaks both of the Western people's "*idolization*" of the actors and singers as well as of the "*offerings*" (*Opfer*) brought to the latter by the people. "One hears more often about young actors and lady singers than about old wise men," claims the Dalai Lama's envoy, who, one should be reminded, belongs to a culture where ancestor worship plays a very important role. And the Oriental ambassador goes on to say: "People idolize the images of the young actors and singers. Offerings after offerings are brought to them. Offerings of money and goods, offerings of words" (13). Beyond these "similarities," however, the Asian ambassador is somewhat perplexed because he perceives that, unlike the Oriental drama, where amusement and devotion are not thought as separated from each other, these terms seem to be antagonistic in Western culture(s). The Dalai Lama, who also perceives the contradiction in his informant's report, claims:

"Pleasure or devotion? Or? Is that a contradiction among the Western people? The poor people!" the Dalai Lama said and smiled mildly, as a Dalai Lama must smile when he would rather shout with laughter. "Pleasure or devotion!" cried the spy, who did not understand his master's smile. "And the gentlemen of the theaters, the kings, the people of the Western lands cannot come to an agreement. The minds



over there are so confused, most praiseworthy Holyness, that the kings achieve the opposite of what they want, as do the people. Believe me! I speak truly. Overall, in London and Paris, in Berlin and in Rome, it is the same. The people want only amusement, joy, pleasure.... The people run into the theaters to watch how a woman dances half-naked and her limbs stretch longingly, and they listen as an encore, with half-ear but nevertheless enchanted, to the profound words which accompany the dance. They do not know, those eternally childish people, that, actually, they are attracted to devotion through expensive costumes and dance steps."

"As in our temples," said the Dalai Lama. But this time, he did not smile. (13-14)

The envoy claims further that while the ruler of the Western state thinks that by means of theatrical representations he is educating the people "in the most pious customs," the people only seek for pleasure and amusement in the theatre (15). The Dalai Lama urges the envoy to propose a plan to introduce the Western theater to the Oriental world. The Dalai Lama argues:

You have seen much over there, in the Western countries. Can you propose a plan for me, how we can introduce to our nations the theatre of the Western countries...? How can we avoid the quarrel between pleasure and devotion, between amusement and earnestness, between pleasure and spiritual enlightenment, or however they call over there, with their languages' words, these oppositions? Can you propose such a plan? Then we will be still dumber than the people of the Western countries if we make their inherited and innate stupidity ours by choice. (17)

It is not the purpose of this paper to analyze in detail Mauthner's text. However, I believe that the comparison of both texts contributes to a better understanding of Borges's story. Both texts present the same situation: an individual placed within a given cultural framework and attempting to make sense of an "alien" institution, the Western theatre. Furthermore, both Borges and Mauthner allow points of criss-crossing between those distinct traditions, enabling their characters to somehow grasp what is being expressed in the tradition to which they do not belong. However, the "cultural framework clash" leads both Mauthner's ambassador and Borges's Averroes to very different results. Thus, for the Dalai Lama's ambassador, comparing the Western theatre with the Oriental theatre entails a way of arriving at a better and more critical understanding of his own culture (Thus, when invited by the Dalai Lama to speak out his mind, the Dalai Lama's envoy suggests the necessity of changes in education and religion, particularly in the way of conceiving the religion-nature relationship). Clearly, in Mauthner's

view, frameworks do not imprison the people that share them and exclude the ones that do not belong to it. Or, if they somehow imprison the people that share them, they also allow for “enlargements,” for there is always the possibility to compare our cultural framework with other frameworks and, as Popper says, “widen our prison” (53). Yet while Mauthner’s ambassador has effectively “widened his prison,” Averroes’ intellectual horizon does not seem to be significantly extended after his confrontation with Aristotle’s text. Granted, Averroes proves to be more skeptical than Farach and his guests towards his own cultural framework (Thus, at one point of the conversation at Farach’s, when the Koranist mentions a variety of rose which is presumably found in the gardens of Hindustan and whose petals display the statement “There is no god but the God, Mohammed is the Apostle of God” (*Labyrinths* 150)<sup>27</sup>, Averroes, adopting a “Humean” skepticism, openly denies its existence). Yet the Arab philosopher does not become aware of the limits of his Platonic framework and, consequently, is not able to break out of it and “widen his prison.”

Silvia G. Dapía  
Purdue University

### Works Cited

- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Other Inquisitions: 1937-1952*. Trans. Ruth L. C Simms. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*. Eds. Donald A. Yates & James E. Irby. New York: New Directions, 1964.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Borges: A Reader*. Eds. Emir Rodríguez Monegal & Alastair Reid. New York: Dutton, 1981.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. “Ultraísmo.” *Las vanguardias literarias en Hispanoamérica: manifiestos, proclamas, y otros escritos*. Ed. Hugo Verani. Roma: Bulzoni, 1986. 287-293.
- Borges, Jorge Luis and Margarita Guerrero. *The Book of Imaginary Beings*. Trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni. New York: Dutton, 1970.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Obras Completas*. 4 vols. Barcelona: Emecé, 1989-1996.
- Christ, Ronald. *The Narrow Act: Borges’ Art of Allusion*. New York: Lumen Books, 1995.
- Dapía, Silvia G. *Die Rezeption der Sprachkritik Fritz Mauthners im Werk von Jorge Luis Borges*. Cologne: Böhlau, 1993.
- Dapía, Silvia G. “Pierre Menard in Context.” *Variaciones Borges* 2 (1996).

---

<sup>27</sup> “no hay otro dios que el Dios, Muhámmad es el Apóstol de Dios” (OC 1: 583).

- Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1962.
- Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. John W Yolton. 2 vols. New York: Dutton, 1971.
- Mauthner, Fritz. *Totengespräche*. Berlin: Karl Schnabel, 1906.
- Merrell, Floyd. *Unthinking Thinking: Jorge Luis Borges, Mathematics, and the New Physics*. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 1991.
- Niggstich, Karl-Josef. *Metaphorik und Polarität im Weltbild Jorge Luis Borges*. Göttingen: Kümmerle, 1976.
- Popper, Karl R. *The Myth of the Framework: In Defence of Science and Rationality*. M. A. Notturmo. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Quine, W. V. *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*. New York: Columbia UP, 1969.
- Rest, Jaime. *El laberinto del universo: Borges y el pensamiento nominalista*. Buenos Aires: Fausto, 1976.
- Shaw, Donald. *Borges' Narrative Strategy*. Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1992.
- Strong, Beret E. *The Poetic Avant-Garde: The Groups of Borges, Auden, and Breton*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1997.
- Videla, Gloria. *El Ultraísmo*. Madrid: Gredos, 1963.
- Wentzlaff-Eggebert, Christian. "Borges 1925." *Europäische Avantgarde im lateinamerikanischen Kontext*. Ed. Wentzlaff-Eggebert Harald. Frankfurt am Main: Veruert, 1991. 183-200.
- Wickham, Glynne. *A History of the Theatre*. London: Phaidon, 1994.