
The Comedy of Language in Borges’ “La busca de Averroes”

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“La busca de Averroes” (“Averroes’ Search”), Borges tells us in an epilogue, is a story of failure: “En la historia anterior quise narrar el proceso de una derrota. . . . Recordé a Averroes, que encerrado en el ámbito del Islam, nunca pudo saber el significado de las voces *tragedia* y *comedia*” (310) [“In the foregoing story, I tried to narrate the process of a defeat. . . . I remembered Averroes who, closed within the orb of Islam, could never know the meaning of the terms *tragedy* and *comedy*” (155)]. Borges delights in the irony that Averroes, the 12th-century Spanish Muslim philosopher so famous for his commentaries on Aristotle, could fail to comprehend these rather unmysterious terms so fundamental to the *Poetics*. Most of Borges’ critics, better poets than historians, take this particular plot as just another instance of the universal one they see in all stories, the tragedy of language. But the critical consensus about the limitations of language in Borges’ stories is too negative, and too simplistic, even with regard to those cases in which Borges himself affirms or seems to affirm it. Like an alarmist chorus, the critics cry that the gods of language go down whenever their oracles fail to travel like Hermes, winging perfectly across time, place, and mind: Averroes fails to translate *tragedy* and *comedy*, and we refuse ever again to go reverent to the altars of the word gods.¹

Of course, the word “gods” can seem rather clumsy, or perhaps it is just that we don’t know how to worship them. Consider that today our access to Aristotle’s discussion of tragedy is far greater than Averroes’, yet we have no consensus about a definition of the term. We also have many rival definitions of comedy, but perhaps that is more excusable given that Aristotle’s discourse on the topic is as lost to us Westerners as it was to Averroes. I find two definitions of comedy relevant to “La busca de Averroes.” The first is the simple, traditional one that we may associate with Dante: a story that ends happily. The second is more complex, though still too narrow to fit many comic plays: a parody of a tragedy, in which events that would bring great pain in a tragic story turn out not to be very painful, and yet, or rather therefore, the characters fail to learn the wisdom that is the consolation of tragic suffering; this wisdom is nevertheless available to attentive members of the audi-

ence. As for Borges' imaginary Averroes, we could follow the prompt of the epilogue and understand him to suffer a modest tragedy in his hermeneutical failure, but I would argue that his story is fundamentally comic, in both of the senses defined above: his single failure sits atop a heap of successes, and yet in the exceptional episode dramatized by Borges, his chance for enlightenment passes him by. More thoroughly comic, in the second sense, is the story of Borges himself and many of his critics: they fail to see the lesson about language that has been paraded before them. They cast language as a failure, when in fact "La busca de Averroes" repeatedly celebrates it as conqueror of history, culture, and subjectivity. I will attempt a reversal here and for help will occasionally turn suppliant before a modern-day oracle, Ludwig Wittgenstein, a philosopher who, because of his understanding of the relation between the particular and the universal, has more in common with Aristotle than might be supposed.

Jon Stewart offers a representative reading of "La busca": "The short story presents us with a thesis about the intimate connection between culture and language and the ultimate futility of translation and crosscultural knowledge and comprehension" (321). According to Ana María Barrenechea's closely related interpretation, the story reveals to us that "Borges siente como escritor que las experiencias son inefables porque es inútil querer traducir con palabras comunes a todos lo único de cada individuo y de cada circunstancia" (78) ["As a writer, Borges feels that experiences are unutterable because of the uselessness of translating the essence of each individual and circumstance with words that are common to all" (80)]. Gene Bell-Villada's reading, which is helpful for the historical context about Averroes it offers, combines the main points of the other two: "the problem at the thematic center of 'Averroës's Search,'" he writes, is

the degree to which any serious attempt to understand materials foreign to one's experience—whether the materials be an institution, an art form, or even an individual—will inevitably run up against the socially formed perceptions of the observer (an idea well known to anthropologists). Indeed, the narrative suggests, through Averroës as well as Borges, that such an enterprise is ultimately hopeless. Inevitably an observer relies on the artifacts and terms received from his or her own time and culture, and any "understanding" yielded by thought and research is only an approximate and partial view of the subject matter. (173)

Thus the critics identify two obstacles for language: the gap between different cultures, especially cultures divided by time, and the gap between different individuals, even individuals within the same culture. In each case, language fails to cross the gap. Is that failure, then, the lesson of "La busca de Averroes"?

It may be the lesson of Averroes' mistranslation of *tragedy* and *comedy*, but we shall see that it is clearly not the lesson of the story as a whole. First we should describe the obstacles as Borges presents them. As an example of the second kind, consider the incident from the story Barrenechea cites as evidence of Borges' opinion that common words are useless for translating unique experiences. She quotes a character named Abulcasim who hesitates when asked to tell a story from his exotic travels:

La memoria de Abulcásim era un espejo de íntimas cobardías. ¿Qué podía referir? Además, le exigían maravillas y la maravilla es acaso incommunicable: la luna de Bengala no es igual a la luna del Yemen, pero se deja describir con las mismas voces. (306)

[Abulcasim's memory was a mirror of intimate cowardices. What could he tell? Besides, they demanded marvels of him and marvels are perhaps incommunicable; the moon of Bengal is not the same as the moon of Yemen, but it may be described in the same words. (151)]

The complaint Abulcasim makes and Barrenechea accepts is unreasonable. What would be the remedy? A language equipped with two words: one for Bengalese moons and another for Yemenite moons and so on? Borges does not intend us to take his character's complaint too seriously here: one ought not to expect "marvels" to be fully communicable, certainly, but surely we can communicate our perception of the moon from disparate places if we use words prudently or poetically, as Borges himself consistently does.

As a younger man, however, Borges does seem to have shared Abulcasim's frustration. He takes it to its logical extension in "Palabrerías para versos" ["Palaver for Poems"], an essay written in 1926 and thus twenty-three years before "La busca." Here the twenty-something Borges suggests that because a given human experience is unique, only a unique word could properly name it:

El mundo aparenicial es complicadísimo y el idioma sólo ha efectuado una parte muy chica de las combinaciones infatigables que podrían llevarse a cabo con él. ¿Por qué no crear una palabra, una sola, para la percepción conjunta de los cencerros insistiendo en la tarde y de la puesta de sol en la lejanía? ¿Por qué no inventar otra para el ruinoso y amenazador ademán que muestran en la madrugada las calles? ¿Y otra para la buena voluntad, conmovedora de puro ineficaz, del primer farol en el atardecer aún claro? ...

Sé lo que hay de utópico en mis ideas y la lejanía entre una posibilidad intelectual y una real, pero confío en el tamaño del porvenir y en que no será menos amplio que mi esperanza. (49)

[The world of appearances is extremely complex and language has only brought into being a very small share of the inexhaustible combinations that might be realized in it. Why not create a word, a single word, for the joint perception of

cowbells declaring the evening and the setting sun in the distance? Why not invent another for the dilapidated, threatening look of the streets at daybreak? And another for the good will, touching in its utter inefficacy, of the first streetlight in the undimmed daylight? ...

I am aware of the utopian quality of my ideas, as I am of the distance between an intellectual possibility and a real one, but I have confidence in the size of the future, and that it will be no less expansive than my hope.]

The critics who cite this passage do so without much scrutiny. James E. Irby calls the passage Borges' "admittedly utopian aspiration toward a language of new and more comprehensive signs" (98). Barrenechea introduces it as Borges' dream of "la creación futura de términos adecuados a las representaciones poéticas" (79) ["the future creation of terms adequate for poetical representation" (80-81)]. Both critics seem to accept Borges' supposition that the language he imagines would improve upon the languages we already have.

But a moment's reflection discovers the confusion of Borges' hope, on both aesthetic and logical grounds. Aesthetically, Borges' utopian language is undesirable. His descriptions are beautiful; why would we want to collapse them into three words? Logically, Borges' expansive hope rests on the unexamined assumption that because the world is filled with a multiplicity of unique phenomena, our understanding of the world will increase to the degree that we approach that multiplicity in our words (though Borges seems to be thinking only of nouns). This is the logic that an older, more comic Borges seems to parody in "Funes el memorioso" ["Funes the Memorious"], of 1944: a boy gifted with perfect perception and memory insists on the need for distinct names for a dog seen from one angle in a given moment and the same dog seen from another angle in the next moment (183/65). Here Borges recognizes that such a language would not make language "more comprehensive," as Irby has it. It would just make dictionaries bigger, and many of the hyperparticular words in them useless, because they would be too numerous for our memories.

In fact, the confusion of Borges' youthful linguistic aspiration is already apparent in "Palabrerías." In an unwitting irony that the older Borges would surely appreciate, the performance of the passage quoted refutes its argument: Borges manages to bring into linguistic being three of those extremely complex phenomena formerly unrealized in language. He brings them to life even as he laments their nonexistence. (He is like a man who repeatedly exclaims, "I cannot speak!" or a literary theorist who repeatedly writes, "Language is bankrupt!") We can already describe highly particular experiences if we use many words well, and thus we need not wait, with Barrenechea, for "the future creation of terms adequate for poetical representation." Spanish (and English to boot) turns out to be up to the task even now, and our good

old signs to be impressively comprehensive, as long as we remember that we are permitted to use them in new and creative combinations. Language is a tradition, and like any tradition it restricts us; but like any good tradition, it also allows and even provokes us to display our resourcefulness.

Moreover, if we grant the assumption that the adequate description of a unique experience (insistent cowbells at dusk) requires a unique vocabulary, it seems to follow that few or perhaps no experiences will be adequately communicable. Is not virtually any experience (of a given individual, in a given moment) so particular that, once translated into the generality of a language many people know, its uniqueness is lost? If we require language to convey such particularity absolutely, then the only way one person could truly understand the experience of another—that is, could achieve more than Bell-Villada's "approximate and partial view"—would be already to have had that experience himself. We see this reasoning in another of Borges' stories, "El congreso" ["The Congress"], when the narrator laments, "Las palabras son símbolos que postulan una memoria compartida. La que ahora quiero historiar es mía solamente; quienes la compartieron han muerto" (129) ["Words are symbols that assume a shared memory. The memory I now want to set down is mine alone; all those who share it have died" (48)]. The logic seems innocuous: words, and all the acts of communication that rely on them, depend on shared experience. Of course they do, to a degree. But when this reasoning goes unqualified, it implies that we can never truly understand anything that we do not *already* understand; thus language could only be a reminder of experience, not a communicator of it. (We note in passing that unreasonable standards invite the skeptic, who in this case might ask whether or not even one's own memory of an experience amounts to more than an approximate and partial view of the original experience.) Perhaps it is the severity of our requirements for communication, then, that accounts for the critics' use of words like "futility," "uselessness," and "hopeless" when they assess our chances for intersubjective or intercultural understanding.

But what cause do we have for accepting so extreme a standard? There is no reason to treat "shared experience" as if it meant "identical experience"; to communicate something is not literally to reproduce it in the listener. What need would there be to communicate an identical experience? That would be like talking to oneself. As Wittgenstein remarks (about the attempt to define a word "privately"), your right hand can give your left hand money, but that does not amount to a gift (268). Communication presupposes both that our experiences are not identical, and that they can nevertheless, to some degree, be made common.

Moreover, as Borges occasionally reminds us, it is easy to exaggerate the uniqueness of individual experience. In “La postulación de la realidad” [“The Postulation of Reality”], he argues that

la imprecisión es tolerable o verosímil en la literatura, porque a ella propendemos siempre en la realidad. La simplificación conceptual de estados complejos es muchas veces una operación instantánea. El hecho mismo de percibir, de atender, es de orden selectivo: toda atención, toda fijación de nuestra conciencia, comporta una deliberada omisión de lo no interesante. (157)

[imprecision is tolerable or plausible in literature because we are always inclined to it in reality. The conceptual simplification of complex states is often an instantaneous operation. The very act of perceiving, of heeding, is of a selective order; every attention, every fixation of our conscience, implies a deliberate omission of that which is uninteresting. (31)]

We tend toward “imprecision”—or rather distillation, generalization—in our writing because we do so naturally in all our understanding. Surely this reduction is not merely a matter of interest but of capacity: finite minds are capable of only a finite amount of information, much less than the amount available to us in a given experience; we are pocket dictionaries, not the *OED*. Could one man ever communicate the infinity of detail and nuance of a given experience to another? No, if only because some portion of that infinity passed him by in the first place. Thus our experience may be unique, but our finitude limits that uniqueness. The extreme precision sought by the positivistic among us, then, does not bring us closer to the reality of human experience, but only to the ideal they have substituted for it. In other words, in communicating human experience, the generic may be truer to the task than the specific. This insight is twin to Aristotle’s claim that we find more truth in the universal than in the particular.² If poetry is a more philosophical, a higher thing than history because it expresses the universal, which we might think of as the particular stripped of its particularity, then Borges’ point is that everyday human understanding is as poetic as it is historical.³

As we have said, a more mature Borges rejects the young Borges’ call for a language of extreme particularity, and he does it not just in “Funes el memorioso” but in “La busca de Averroes.” The story shows us that the use of common words to express unique experiences is not so much an unfortunate limitation but the key to successful intersubjective communication. Thus this supposed shortcoming of language, which Barrenechea sees as “Miseria del hombre y del instrumento que maneja” (79) [“Man’s sad condition and that of the tool he employs” (80)], is proved a virtue in the very story she uses to make her critique. “La busca” is filled with feats of communication. The doubtful Abulcasim, of course, is not the hero

of the story. Averroes, the title character, is; and each time Abulcasim or any other character seems to confirm language for an enemy, Averroes effects a peripety by bringing us to recognize it as close kin, and an ally.

First he shows us that if language were not more general than the unique experience it is used to describe, it would be useless. Two pages after Abulcasim's complaint about language and moons, Averroes says,

Para alabar a Ibn-Sháraf de Berja, se ha repetido que sólo él pudo imaginar que las estrellas en el alba caen lentamente, como las hojas caen de los árboles; ello, si fuera cierto, evidenciaría que la imagen es baladí. La imagen que un solo hombre puede formar es la que no toca a ninguno. (308)

[In praise of Ibn-Sharaf of Berja it has been repeated that only he could imagine that the stars at dawn fall slowly, like leaves from a tree; if this were so, it would be evidence that the image is banal. The image one man can form is an image that touches no one. (153-154)]

Here Borges offers us a literary rendition of Wittgenstein's (excessively explained) argument against "private" languages,⁴ and he makes the same simple yet important point: the phenomenon of language happens not within a single mind, but rather between two minds or among many.⁵ Language is not thwarted by the problem of other minds; it is the solution for it.

Averroes follows his defense of the generality of words with an example that illustrates the way in which the language of one man can touch a great many others. When the several guests at a dinner party agree that an ancient metaphor conceived by the great 6th-century Arab poet Zuhair, in which he compares destiny to a blind camel, is so worn as to be meaningless, Averroes defends it: "nadie no sintió alguna vez que el destino es fuerte y es torpe, que es inocente y es también inhumano.... No se dirá mejor lo que allí se dijo" (309) ["there is no one who has not felt at some time that destiny is clumsy and powerful, that it is innocent and also inhuman.... What was said there will not be said better" (154)]. Averroes does not suggest that all men have had the identical experience, but merely one similar to that of the man who first crafted the metaphor. Borrowing Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblances (66-67), we might say they have met an experience of the same family.

Averroes goes on to explain that because words are products of use, they have histories, and these histories nourish them. Words pass through different times, places, and minds, sweeping up nuances and associations as a river sweeps up particles from its bed.

Además (y esto es acaso lo esencial de mis reflexiones), 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 aquel árabe muerto.... 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. (309)

[Besides (and this is perhaps the essential part of my reflections), 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.... Time broadens the scope of verses and I know of some which, like music, are everything for all men. (154)]

Elsewhere Borges says that an author creates his precursors because our understanding of a given author influences our understanding of earlier authors who resemble him.⁶ Averroes' explanation suggests that a word creates its precursors as well, that is, its previous uses. Thus the recyclability of language, which is made possible by its generality, allows well-wrought language like verses to build a kind of curriculum vitae that builds in both directions, such that the work experience of words or word groups can enhance their performance on a past job as well as on the next.

Wittgenstein offers an instructive metaphor for the way in which we creatively reapply words first learned in a different application:

Warum nennen wir etwas "Zahl"? Nunetwa, weil es eine—direkte—Verwandschaft mit manchem hat, was man bisher Zahl genannt hat; und dadurch, kann man sagen, erhält es eine indirekte Verwandschaft zu anderem, was wir auch *so* nennen. Und wir dehnen unseren Begriff der Zahl aus, wie wir beim Spinnen eines Fadens Faser an Faser drehen. (67)

[Why do we call something a "number"? Well, perhaps because it has a—direct—relationship with several things that have hitherto been called number; and this can be said to give it an indirect relationship to other things we call the same name. And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. (67)]

A single word, then, can be spun out into an indefinite number of new applications.

Averroes illustrates this point by relating a story in which the recollection of another verse—"Tú también eres, ¡oh palma! / En este suelo extranjera" ["You too, oh palm!, are / Foreign to this soil"]—comforted him in a context both different from and similar to that of the man who had uttered it long before, Abdurrahman: "Singular beneficio de la poesía; palabras redactadas por un rey que anhelaba el Oriente me sirvieron a mí, desterrado en Africa, para mi nostalgia de España" (309) ["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" (154)]. And it is of course precisely the generality of language that makes it useful: Abdurrahman's

language, though born of and originally expressive of a unique experience, can be meaningful for Averroes in his equally unique experience only because words are understood in *common*—that is, because they are *communicable*. Language does not allow us to have another person's experience, but by means of a conceptual simplification of that complex state, to use Borges' words from "The Postulation of Reality," it does allow us to understand it and learn from it, and in that way to make it our own.⁷

The second obstacle faced by language in "La busca," the gap between different cultures, is the one to which critics devote more attention, in part because that is the gap which Borges-narrator makes the subject of his epilogue. As if ashamed at having undertaken so proud an endeavor as to write his story, he concludes it with a kind of confession:

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 adarnes de Renan, de Lane y de Asín Palacios. (310)

[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. (155)]

But before we hasten to form a kommos by adding our lamentations of Borges' hubris to his own, we should remind ourselves that what interests Borges is exceptions, not rules, and that his choice of Averroes' mistranslation as his subject is a case in point: the man is not famous because he got everything in Aristotle wrong; the particular failure Borges takes as his subject stands out precisely because Averroes' interpretation of Aristotle is generally so successful. It is indeed "la obra monumental que lo justificaría ante las gentes" (304) ["the monumental work which would justify him in the eyes of men" (149)], as Borges imagines Averroes reflecting—this despite using not the original Greek but the translation of a translation to interpret a text from fifteen centuries earlier. The exceptional misprision Borges chronicles, then, reminds us of the rule of successful translation and cross-cultural comprehension.⁸

Thus when we read Borges' confessional epilogue, we must not stop with Stewart's conclusion that "Borges indicates that just as Averroes was limited by his time and its conceptual scheme, so also we are limited by ours" (327). Surely Borges is, and surely we are; but the thrust of his story is emphatically not that language and understanding are so dependent on culture that we cannot read or think our way beyond it.⁹ Stewart's reading is often astute, but in advancing his unobjectionable argument that language is not "an entity neutral with respect to culture and his-

tory” (321), he overcompensates, making language and understanding out to be far more restricted by culture than either common sense or Borges’ story suggests. Stewart asserts that

Although the concept of drama is explained to Averroes, it remains incomprehensible. Even when Abulcasim sees a [Chinese] drama with his own eyes, he fails to comprehend it fully because he lacks a certain fundamental conceptual category.... The network of beliefs [of the Arab worldview] and the language connected with it held Averroes in a fixed cultural and historical space that he was unable to transcend. It caused him to perceive certain things and overlook others. Borges indicates that Averroes is in some sense ultimately limited to the cognitive structures and conceptual categories that the Arab world of his day had at its disposal. (326)

This limitation would be tragic if it were true as a principle; culture would become fate. But “La busca” is lighter fare. Averroes was unable, in this case, to transcend his culture and history, but only in the way that no one has had an idea before he has had it, and no art form has emerged before it has emerged. Does that mean that Averroes was so fixed in his worldview that he could never have grasped the concepts of tragedy and comedy? Of course not. Perhaps all it would have taken was a better tutor than Abulcasim, who, as Stewart notes (324), was himself bewildered by the spectacle he witnessed; his uncomprehending account at the dinner party is one of the comic highpoints of the story.

Averroes’ attempt to understand a concept foreign to his cultural and historical space seems futile only if we accept for intercultural understanding the mistaken assumption we rejected for intersubjective understanding: that it is predicated not on similar experience but on identical experience. Of Averroes’ attempt to understand Aristotle, Stewart writes that the Muslim scholar “could only be successful to the extent to which the Arab culture coincided with the Greek” (327). Jaime Alazraki seems to concur. Explaining what he takes to be a chain of causation in the story, he writes, “Los conceptos ‘tragedia’ y ‘comedia’ presuponen la idea previa de ‘teatro’; pretender explicar aquéllos sin entender el sentido de ésta equivale a romper la secuencia de un orden irrevocable,” one that includes not just many but “infinitos eslabones ... todos los siglos que precedieron a la creación del teatro” (98) [“The concepts of ‘tragedy’ and ‘comedy’ presuppose the previous idea of ‘theater’; to attempt to explain the former terms without understanding the meaning of the latter is to attempt to break the sequence of an irrevocable order,” one that includes not just many but “infinite links ... all the centuries that preceded the creation of the theater”]. The logic seems to be that Averroes could have understood Aristotle only to the extent that medieval Muslim Spain *was* ancient Greece. But if intercultural understanding is so restricted, how then do we explain Averroes’ celebrated

commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics* or Plato's *Republic*? Were not these commentaries themselves in part *responsible for* "the extent to which the Arab culture coincided with the Greek"?

The more reasonable conclusion is the more modest one Borges' epilogue implies: that a man who understood so much of Aristotle could have achieved a proper understanding of tragedy and comedy had he had more information, just as Borges' imagination could have come closer to the real Averroes if he had had more intimate and exhaustive sources about him. Borges clearly assumes that language could have allowed him to cross time and culture to Averroes, just as it could have (and usually did) allow Averroes to cross time and culture to Aristotle. What was needed was a better library, that is, more language, not less culture.¹⁰ The contrary argument carries us away until it would seem to compel us to argue that no one raised in a strictly Muslim culture could understand the Aristotelian concepts of tragedy and comedy, even today.

Furthermore, consider that if it were true that our culture so dominated our understanding, we would be hard-pressed to account even for significant changes *within* a given culture. For example, how could we account for the invention of tragedy and comedy by the Greeks themselves? Recall Stewart's assertion that Averroes is "in some sense ultimately limited to the cognitive structures and conceptual categories that the Arab world *of his day* had at its disposal" (my emphasis). But if culture limits our thinking so severely, then how does a single culture ever change, simply within itself—that is, how does it ever modify or replace its current cognitive structures and conceptual categories? Scholars will debate the particulars of the development of Greek drama to the end, but it is axiomatic to the inquiry, from the *Poetics* onward, that there was a time when there was no "tragedy" and no "comedy" at all. Thus unless we are willing to advance the sole theory no one has ever proposed, that drama had no origin but always already existed among the Greeks—which is what the logical extension of the critics' conclusion about "La busca" would seem to necessitate—we must admit that such a thing can come into being where it had not existed before. The ancient Greeks' successful development of an art form where previously there had been none, or only some less sophisticated thing, like the dithyramb, demonstrates that culture is not fate. The contrary claim fizzles: to say that Averroes lacked "a certain fundamental conceptual category" is merely to say that a man doesn't know a word because he doesn't know a word. This view seems to leave no room for the kind of creative thread-spinning we observe in Borges' Averroes.

Or should we assume that a kind of drama—no, not an instance of the *eidōs* of tragedy or comedy, just something like what the Greeks call by that name—could

never have developed in the Arab world, as it did in the Greek and the Chinese? In assuming the contrary we do not mean to imply that such an invention would not be more difficult or take more time in a Muslim society, that it would not have to contend with rigid orthodox ideas of acceptable art, or even that aspects of this culture would not have to change in advance of such an invention.¹¹ We mean only that there is no principle in language or understanding that prevents it.

Borges, in any case, does not seem to have thought so. Consider that his Averroes sees children play-acting just outside his study:

Averroes dejó la pluma. Se dijo (sin demasiada fe) que suele estar muy cerca lo que buscamos.... De esa estudiosa distracción lo distrajo una suerte de melodía. Miró por el balcón enrejado; abajo, en el estrecho patio de tierra, jugaban unos chicos semidesnudos. Uno, de pie en los hombros de otro, hacía notoriamente de almuédano; bien cerrados los ojos, salmodiaba *No hay otro dios que el Dios*. El que lo sostenía, inmóvil, hacía de alminar; otro, abyecto en el polvo y arrodillado, de congregación de los fieles. (304)

[Averroes put down his pen. He told himself (without excessive faith) that what we seek is often nearby.... From this studious distraction, he was distracted by a kind of melody. He looked through the lattice-work balcony; below, in the narrow earthen patio, some half-naked children were playing. One, standing on another's shoulders, was obviously playing the part of a muezzin; with his eyes tightly closed, he chanted, "There is no god but the God." The one who held him motionlessly played the part of the minaret; another, abject in the dust and on his knees, the part of the faithful worshipers. (149)]

The impersonations of these children, as Borges hints, are nothing other than what Aristotle considered the seed of drama: the universal (i.e., transcultural, translinguistic, transsubjective) human love of imitation. "Thus from childhood," Aristotle writes, "it is instinctive in human beings to imitate, and man differs from the other animals as the most imitative of all and getting his first lessons by imitation, and by instinct also all human beings take pleasure in imitations" (47). Averroes only sees children playing, and returns to his work.

Stewart is certainly right to identify this episode as a failure of understanding: "The truth that [Averroes] sought was indeed nearby, but he was unable to recognize it since it was hidden in the fabric of daily life" (323). But there is more to it than that. The episode is also persuasive testimony that some aspects of human nature are more universal than culture is particular, and that creation is always possible within a culture, even if on specific occasions it goes unrealized. It is surely true that the fabric of daily life is so tightly woven that such occasions are often missed, and surely this is the reason Borges' Averroes sees no relation between the boys' game and the concepts in Aristotle that elude him. But just as surely, fabrics fray, threads

sometimes come loose, and that is when we can spin them out in new directions, just as (perhaps) the chorus leader came loose from the rest of the dithyrambic chorus and was spun out by some thespian into Actor #1. Indeed, as Bell-Villada astutely notes, Borges hints to us that history is on the side of theater: "The fact that the children speak in a Romance language [Spanish] and not in Arabic suggests that their incipient language and spontaneous game, both of which stand outside the Islamic mainstream, represent an emergent Spain, a culture in which theater would eventually flourish" (173-174). On this reading of Borges' story, then, Averroes, or the orb of Islam itself, was not in principle barred from the invention of an art form similar to the one that had bloomed in the distant Greek culture; it may have been only an artistic anagnorisis away. What makes the irony of Borges' story dramatic, then, is that his Averroes was tantalizingly close to success—it is as if he had only to reach out and grasp it—while we in the audience know it, and he never does.

We said at the outset that it is possible to cast Borges' Averroes as a tragic hero. His story is one of a better-than-average man (like all of us) who nobly struggles against the limits of culture and language and fails, not through vice or depravity, but through an error in judgment; it is a misfortune that did not have to happen. We feel pity for him because his misfortune is undeserved, the consequence of his culture, or what we might call a curse of heritage; and we feel fear for ourselves, because someday we, too, may fail to understand a word.

Or a story. Because to insist on so humorless a reading would be half-willfully blind. Surely Averroes is better understood as a comic hero according to the second definition given earlier: the long-lost wisdom he has been looking for stands before him, ready to be embraced—and he looks over its shoulder. Further, I would suggest that there are other comic heroes hereabouts; as Greek drama teaches us, things in plain view often go unseen. Recall that even though in his epilogue Borges clearly identifies the source of his own comic hamartia—he lacked the right books!—we nevertheless blame it on some "tragic flaw" we suppose to reside in the character of language; and, bettering Averroes, we do it unobstructed by a gap in language or culture. We critics will not be denied our role. ✱

Notes

¹ I have in mind the second stasimon of Robert Fagles' translation of *Oedipus the King*, in which the Chorus demands that Zeus make good on terrible oracles that seem to have failed:

Never again will I go reverent to Delphi,
the inviolate heart of Earth

or Apollo's ancient oracle at Abae
or Olympia of the fires --
unless these prophecies all come true
for all mankind to point toward in wonder.
King of kings, if you deserve your titles
Zeus, remember, never forget!
You and your deathless, everlasting reign.
They are dying, the old oracles sent to Laius,
now our masters strike them off the rolls.
Nowhere Apollo's golden glory now --
the gods, the gods go down. (ll. 985-997)

² See *Aristotle's Poetics*, Chapter 9.

³ Cf. Silvia G. Dapía's instructive discussion of "Funes el memorioso" (159-160), in which she outlines Locke's arguments against a hyperparticular language of the kind Borges imagines both in "Funes" and in "Palabrerías para versos."

⁴ An important topic in *Philosophical Investigations*. Arguably, the whole book bears on the theme (but see 80-88 and 179-202, esp. 197-202). Saul Kripke offers a division of the book in terms of this theme (78-81).

⁵ John Sturrock makes the point nicely even though he does not refer to Wittgenstein: "A pristine language is a contradiction in terms, and the search for one would be strictly anti-social since a pristine language would also need to be a private language. Borges, like any satirist, is on the side of sociability" (278).

⁶ See "Kafka y sus precusores" (117) ["Kafka and His Precursors" (201)].

⁷ Cf. Dapía's helpful discussion (152-154). Also see Sturrock, who is a curious case. Often he seems to strike a balance between the limitations and capabilities of language and even to recognize that they are opposite sides of the same coin: "But if language is inadequate to reality it is also relatively stable; indeed, its failure and success in these respects are indivisible" (278). Thus he seems to advise us to accept language's limitations and to regard the glass as half full as well as half empty. Yet in his discussion of the details of Borges' story he emphasizes language's failures, seeming to note its successes only as afterthoughts. For example, he cites Averroes' quotation of Abdurrahman's apostrophe to the palm tree as evidence that language is blunt in its generality rather than vital in its particularity: "The premise is that all we can hope to say has already been said, that the quest for novelty in expression is mistaken. Here, once more, we meet with the cruel inequality between a plethoric reality, of unique and transient phenomena, and the parsimony of language, which possesses only general terms in which to allude to it" (285). When in the next paragraph he rightly notes that even quotation is a kind of innovation, it is small consolation; it is also late, because the article has come to its end, and we are left with the impression that the glass is three-fourths empty. I would argue that the glass is filled almost to the brim, and that Borges at his best makes it seem to spill over.

⁸ Some critics suggest that Averroes does not so much make a mistake as appropriate his own meaning from Aristotle's text. See, for example, Daniel Balderston: "'La busca de Averroes,' then, is the story of the founding text of literary theory, as misunderstood—or better still, as reimagined—in a different cultural context" (205); or Carter Wheelock, who is thinking of Platonic forms and their instantiations: "The conception of tragedy and comedy to which Averroes finally attains is of the same mold, being only one articulation of the form, and failing, therefore, to correspond to it absolutely" (156). But Averroes' rendering of Aristotle's text is not a valid refashioning of Aristotle's ideas; it is a blunder. Averroes does not fall into ruin like a tragic hero, but he does trip. Borges' epilogue makes it clear that he agrees. Floyd Merrell (225) and Bell-Villada (173) give detailed accounts of what they take to be Averroes' partial success without minimizing his failure (cf. Sturrock 280).

⁹ Dapía rightly argues against exaggerating the conceptual barriers between cultures, but for her the more important intellectual division is not that between medieval Arab and ancient Greek cultures but that between Aristotelian and Platonic modes of thought (esp. 154-158).

¹⁰ Though Ilan Stavans might disagree, this conclusion would seem to be supported by his hypothesis that Averroes was working not merely with a translation several times removed from Aristotle's original, but also with an incomplete translation, one lacking the passages that would have helped him distinguish drama from poetry (17-18).

See also Umberto Eco, who exaggerates the tyranny of culture over language. After making the nearly tautologous assertion that "la traducción no es sólo un asunto que implica dos lenguas, sino también un encuentro entre culturas" ["translation is not merely a matter that involves two languages, it also involves an encounter between cultures"], he goes on to claim that

Aun cuando Averroes hubiera tenido un diccionario griego-árabe que le dijera cómo se traduce en su lengua el término griego tragedia, habría seguido sin comprender qué es una tragedia, porque su cultura no lo había habituado a obras teatrales. (80-81)

[Even if Averroes had had a Greek-Arabic dictionary that told him how to translate the Greek term *tragedy* into his language, he would have gone on without understanding what a tragedy is because his culture had not habituated him to theatrical works.]

I, and I think Borges, would say it depends on the dictionary.

Also see Merrell's conclusion (228), which is similar to mine but more cautious.

¹¹ See Bell-Villada 172.

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