

## BORGES ON LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

by JON STEWART

ALTHOUGH JORGE LUIS BORGES had years of philosophical training and expressed a number of philosophical theories in his literary works, he never published a philosophy treatise. The result is that his *oeuvre* has often been viewed as purely literary and been largely neglected by trained philosophers. However, by ignoring the philosophical aspects of Borges's thought, criticism has neglected a vast dimension of his work and has thus frequently misunderstood and misinterpreted many aspects of it. As I have tried to demonstrate in an earlier article,<sup>1</sup> there are important philosophical themes in the short stories of Borges, which have yet to be considered. In the present essay, I take up one of these heretofore neglected themes.

We can find perhaps no better example of the literary exposition of Borges's philosophical ideas than in his short story or *cuento*, "Averroes' Search."<sup>2</sup> There Borges reconstructs for us a culture and an age radically different and temporally distant from our own. He recounts the story of Averroes, the Arab philosopher living in Spain in the second half of the twelfth century. The history of philosophy knows Averroes as one of the great medieval commentators on the works of Aristotle. Borges recreates the historical moment and the passion of Averroes in his task of translating and providing a commentary for the texts of the great Greek philosopher who remains forever distant from him. The story takes as its point of departure Renan's observation about a curious misinterpretation of Aristotle found in Averroes: "*S'imaginant que la tragédie n'est autre chose que l'art de louer . . .*" (p. 180). Borges poses

the question of why Averroes, who had dedicated his life to understanding the work of Aristotle, had so badly misunderstood the concept of tragedy treated by the Greek philosopher. To answer this question, Borges brilliantly employs the faculty of historical imagination in order to think himself back into Averroes's particular time period and cultural context. 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. In the present essay, I wish to argue that the point of Borges's story about the fate of Averroes is (1) to refute the common view which sees language as an entity neutral with respect to culture and history, and (2) to bring to light the comprehensive nature and scope of particular culturally and historically determined ways of thinking and perceiving the world. These philosophical elements have been neglected by the various literary scholars who have treated the works of Borges.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Borges anticipates many of the most celebrated epistemological and hermeneutical theories of our day from philosophers such as Gadamer, Davidson and Quine, and presents them in literary form.

## I

There is a common view according to which the manifold languages of the various peoples and cultures of the world are more or less interchangeable. According to this linguistics of common sense, language is something secondary and accidental which is only an inessential corollary to our basic understanding and perception of the world. Human perception and cognition are thought of as constants for all humans everywhere. A dog will be perceived as a dog regardless of time period, place or culture, and the words we create to represent "dog" in the medium of language are secondary and even arbitrary. As a result, individual words in one language correspond to individual words in another. *Dog* in English corresponds straightforwardly to *Hund* in German or *perro* in Spanish, and nothing could be more simple. The gifted translator is merely someone with a great capacity to memorize words and to effect rapid replacement changes, and translation is regarded as a more or less mechanical process with little room for creativity. The diversity of languages is neither epistemologically necessary nor important, but rather explained as an historical accident as in the etiological tale of the Tower of Babel. Language has no necessary connection to the time period in which it is spoken or to the culture of

the people who speak it. That we who live in the world after Babel speak English or French is a happening due solely to chance, and we could just as easily speak Hindi or Mongolian.

There is likewise a naive epistemological view according to which cultural differences are, like language, immediately comprehensible and entirely translatable. This is, in fact, the underlying assumption upon which the discipline of cultural anthropology was originally founded and which has been put into question only recently by studies on the hermeneutics of the social sciences. Although anthropologists and sociologists today are by no means so naive, the view still exists in many different forms in the contemporary academic world. According to one sanguine characterization, "There is always some way of understanding an idiot, a child, a primitive man or a foreigner if one has sufficient information."<sup>4</sup> The idea is that we can, by mere observation, make sense of specific actions and practices in a given culture. The underlying premise is that there are hidden structural commonalities between our culture and the culture we are studying and these common structures allow us to identify and render intelligible given practices in foreign cultures by analogy to certain practices in our own. Foreign cultures are thus deemed transparent to the anthropologist trained in the proper empirical methodologies. Anthropologists must merely observe the object domain and then seek the corresponding practice in their own culture. Just as there is, on the naive view of language, a one-to-one correspondence between words and languages, so there is thought to be something like a one-to-one correspondence between cultures and the institutions and practices they contain. Borges's story calls into question these common sense theories of both language and culture.

## II

The age of Averroes was one in which truth was not considered, as it is today, something elusive which had to be painstakingly sought, but instead, was thought already at hand in the works of Aristotle and in the Koran. The task of the scholar was not to discover new truths independently, which was considered the mark of the "illiterate and vain . . . desire for innovation" (pp. 186-87), but rather to understand correctly the truth already given in Aristotle, the man referred to by Dante with humility and profound deference simply as "The Philosopher." Borges writes, "This Greek, the fountainhead of all philosophy, had been

spatial but above all cultural and conceptual, which Borges notes by portraying Averroes's momentary pause in contemplation of the "fear of the crassly infinite" (p. 184). The traveler tells of a strange and incomprehensible spectacle that he witnessed in the distant city of Sin Kalan:

One afternoon, the Moslem merchants of Sin Kalan took me to a house of painted wood where many people lived. It is impossible to describe the house, which was rather a single room, with rows of cabinets or balconies on top of each other. In these cavities there were people who were eating and drinking, and also on the floor, and also on a terrace. The persons on this terrace were playing the drum and the lute, save for some fifteen or twenty (with crimson-colored masks) who were praying, singing and conversing. They suffered prison, but no one could see the jail; they travelled on horseback, but no one could see the horse; they fought, but the swords were of reed; they died and then stood up again. (p. 184)

The listeners find the account bewildering and can only conclude that the men of Sin Kalan were mad. Abulcasim, however, assures them that this was not the case: "These were no madmen. . . . They were representing a story, a merchant told me." This explanation likewise meets with dumb bewilderment: "No one understood, no one seemed to want to understand." Abulcasim becomes exasperated as he tries to make clear something which he himself does not truly comprehend. The discussion ends once the host, upon learning that the men of Sin Kalan speak while representing the story, conclusively declares, "In that case twenty persons are unnecessary. One single speaker can tell anything no matter how complicated it might be" (p. 185). When this statement meets with the approbation of all, the discussion moves on to other topics. Once again, Averroes was remarkably near to having the answer to the translation riddle that was vexing him. This time, instead of it being presented to him by a chance occurrence such as the children's game below his window, the answer was in a sense explained to him, albeit ineptly, by Abulcasim in the description of the drama that the latter was witness to. But even this attempt at a discursive explanation utterly failed, and Averroes could never have known that the words "tragedy" and "comedy" were bound up with the bizarre spectacle witnessed and recounted by Abulcasim.

Finally, when Averroes returns to his library after the evening of stories and speculations both theological and literary, he believes that he has solved the riddle that had so perplexed him: "Something had

bestowed upon men to teach them all that could be known; to interpret his works as the ulema interpret the Koran was Averroes' arduous purpose" (p. 181). The intellectual mission of Averroes was to write a grand commentary on the complete Aristotelian corpus which he patiently executed day after day. His scholarly gifts allowed him no small measure of success in this ambitious project and, indeed, he filled many volumes until he came upon two words that stopped him abruptly. At the beginning of the *Poetics*, Aristotle employs the words "tragedy" and "comedy" which are incomprehensible to the Arab doctor. These words, which seem to defy explanation, cannot be avoided or ignored since they run throughout the text and seem to form an integral part of it. Thus, the problem of the correct translation and elucidation of these two unknown terms vexes and exercises Averroes during long hours, and this constitutes the principal issue of the story. This is Averroes's futile search.

Ironically foreshadowing, Borges describes Averroes' frustration: "He told himself (not with excessive faith) that what we seek is often nearby" (p. 181). Using this insight, Averroes goes over to the shelves to consult a book by another Arab author to see if perchance it contains the secret to the mysterious words. But the key to the secret lies not in the erudite tomes of his proud library but rather in the naive games of the children playing in the street below his study:

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 worshippers. (p. 181)

The children, pretending to be who they are not, collectively tell a story by acting out particular events. This is similar to what the Greeks and inhabitants of the Latin world call "drama," but for Averroes it is simply a fatuous children's game without any further significance. He turns back to his books and continues his desperate search.<sup>5</sup> The truth that he sought was indeed nearby, but he was unable to recognize it since it was hidden in the fabric of daily life.

Averroes passes the evening at a friend's house where they are entertained by the exotic tales of the traveler Abulcasim who has just returned from distant lands. The distance evoked here is not merely

revealed to him the meaning of the two obscure words. With firm and careful calligraphy he added these lines to the manuscript: 'Aristu (Aristotle) gives the name of tragedy to panegyrics and that of comedy to satires and anathemas'" (p. 187). Thus ends the story with the mistaken definition of the Greek terms recalled later by Renan. This misinterpretation constitutes the crux of the story, and thus a correct understanding of it is essential for a correct interpretation of the *cuento* as a whole.

### III

The secondary literature on this story seems entirely to have missed the thesis about the relation of culture and language contained in it. Wheelock, for instance, sees the philosophical point at issue here as being the rather banal claim that particular descriptions and empirical events necessarily fall short of Platonic forms. "The conception of tragedy and comedy to which Averroes finally attains," he writes, "is of the same mold being only one articulation of the form, and failing, therefore, to correspond to it absolutely." According to this reading, Borges is offering us little more than a warmed over version of any one of the traditional Platonic refutations of empiricism. On this view, there is a problem with every definition in principle since every definition, in its particularity, fails adequately to capture the universality of ideas or Platonic forms. This account, however, misunderstands the nature of the error contained in Averroes's definition and, with it, the point of the story as a whole. The definition of Averroes errs in its attempt to understand the words in question in terms of the cultural categories provided by the Koran and the Arab world, and it is precisely because of this and not because of its finite empirical character that it is condemned to failure. It is not by chance that after his mistaken definition Averroes adds, "Admirable tragedies and comedies abound in the pages of the Koran and in the *mohalacas* of the sanctuary" (p. 187). The Arab culture and language shape his way of conceiving the world and render it impossible for him to grasp the true meaning of the mysterious words. Borges writes, "no one *in the whole world of Islam* could conjecture what they meant" (p. 181). The point is not that a correct definition of tragedy and comedy are in principle impossible but rather that the possibility of the very understanding of the concepts of tragedy and comedy is culturally conditioned.

Borges's story is concerned not merely with the issue of the simplistic

play of universals and particulars; instead, it tries to portray, via the pathos of Averroes, the necessary connection between language and culture. The Arab world, because it did not know drama as an art form, did not possess the linguistic and conceptual apparatus requisite for genuinely understanding and subsequently translating the terms "tragedy" and "comedy," which are so familiar to the Western mind. Although the concept of drama is explained to Averroes, it remains incomprehensible. Even when Abulcasim sees a drama with his own eyes, he fails to comprehend it fully because he lacks a certain fundamental conceptual category. In the story, the Arab world with its culture and language represents what philosophers used to call a "notion," a "world-view" or an "*épistème*" and what contemporary thinkers tend to refer to as a "conceptual scheme" or "paradigm." The network of beliefs 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. Where there is no category, he simply cannot understand. Nevertheless, he is able to form an interpretation of foreign concepts in accordance with his own conceptual scheme. But this interpretation is false *vis-à-vis* the true one of the Greek world. Here the Greek concept is true only by virtue of the fact that the phenomenon in question is one that forms a part of Greek culture and has its origin there. Likewise, the Greco-Roman culture has in its turn simplified and distorted a number of concepts and notions from the Arab world. As Borges notes in the first sentence of the story, the very name Averroes is the conveniently simplified Latin version of an extremely complex Arabic name full of patronymics which seemed utterly incomprehensible to the Latin mind: "Abulgualid Muhammad ibn-Ahmad ibn-Muhammad ibn-Rushd (a century this name would take to become Averroes, first becoming Benraist and Avenryz and even Aben-Rassad and Filius Rosadis)." Thus, we seem to have a case of two different notions which carve up the world in different and in partly incommensurable ways.

Borges, with the aid of historical imagination, is careful to underline a number of significant cultural differences which separate the modern reader from Averroes and the culture in which he lived and worked. Borges casually notes that Averroes writes "from right to left," thus underscoring the difference in the written forms of the Arabic and

Latin languages. The cultural distance between Averroes and the object of his study is highlighted by the observation that he "was working with the translation of a translation" (p. 181). Averroes had direct access neither to Aristotle's own text nor to the Greek language and thus was compelled to approach his subject matter by means of inexact and distorting mediating agencies. In his epilogue, Borges concludes his account by speculating on his own ultimate inability to understand and reconstruct the cultural context of Averroes: "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" (pp. 187-88). With this reflexive turn back to himself and likewise back to the contemporary age, Borges indicates that just as Averroes was limited by his time and its conceptual scheme, so also we are limited by ours.

Averroes's life-long goal was to understand and interpret the works of Aristotle. He could only be successful to the extent to which the Arab culture coincided with the Greek. The irony that Borges points out is that the greatest imbecile among the Greeks could immediately grasp what for the polymath Averroes was incomprehensible. Borges writes,

In the foregoing story, I tried to narrate the process of a defeat. I thought of that archbishop of Canterbury who took it upon himself to prove there is God; then of the alchemists who sought the philosopher's stone; then, of the vain trisectors of the angle and squarers of the circle. Later I reflected that it would be more poetic to tell the case of a man who sets himself a goal which is not forbidden to others, but is to him. I remembered Averroes who, closed within the orb of Islam, could never know the meaning of the terms *tragedy* and *comedy*. (p. 187)<sup>6</sup>

Even the illiterate Athenian will immediately and intuitively grasp the meanings of the words "tragedy" and "comedy" since they constitute the background knowledge of his culture. However, for the erudite Arab physician surrounded by learned tomes, they remain in obscurity since, despite his erudition, he is ultimately limited to the epistemological categories of his culture. It is this point which gives the story its pathos.

Borges's account demonstrates the fallacy of the view that sees languages as complex systems constructed with one-to-one correspondences between individual members. In the case of Averroes, no correspondence was possible since there was no institution in his



culture and hence no word in his language that could have served as an analogue to the event of drama on the Greek stage and the words "tragedy" and "comedy" in the Greek language. A language contains only the tools with which its culture has equipped it and is not something transcendent which floats over and above culture and human practices. Likewise, the story refutes the assumption that we can in principle understand the totality of practices of other cultures by simple observation and comparison by analogy. Borges demonstrates with this historical example that there will be certain practices which will always defy our comprehension and from which we, for all of our scientific achievements, will be forever barred. This is, needless to say, a far-reaching epistemological thesis which many contemporary philosophers and social scientists have wrestled with. "Averroes' Search" is the story of a futile effort to break out of the constraints of historical time and cultural distance and isolation. The concept of solitude is captured not merely by the hundred year lifetime of a small town erased forever by tempests and nameless jungles, but also by the cultural and spatial distances which efface entire peoples, languages, and cultures from the increasingly homogeneous collective human memory. Objective calendar time and absolute space in the natural world constitute distances that can be overcome, in the one case, by the scholarship and imagination of the historian and, in the other, by the technology of the engineer and the natural scientist; however, cultural distances are much greater than these natural ones, and Borges's story shows us that they can on occasion constitute spaces which no degree of imagination, technology, or erudition can ever help us traverse.

HUMBOLDT UNIVERSITY, BERLIN

1. "Borges on Immortality," *PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE* 17 (1993): 78-82.
2. "Averroes' Search" appears in Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths, Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: Penguin, 1981). Page references refer to this edition.
3. None of the following commentators mentions the issue of the connection between language and culture in reference to this story: Ana Maria Barrenechea, *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Borges* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Paidós, 1967), pp. 173-74; Jaime

Alazraki, *Versiones, Inversiones, Reversiones, El Espejo como modelo estructural del relato en los cuentos de Borges* (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1977), pp. 59–61; Luis Antezana Juárez, *Algebra y Fuego, Lectura de Borges* (Louvain: Éditions Nauwelaerts, 1978), pp. 70–89.

4. Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1948), p. 47.
5. See Carter Wheelock, *The Mythmaker. A Study of Motif and Symbol in the Short Stories of Jorge Luis Borges* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), p. 158: "The boys playing muezzin . . . do not have any overt connection, of course, with Averroes' search."
6. One author incomprehensibly takes this as a statement about causality, i.e., in order to understand tragedy and comedy, it is necessary (in a causal sense) to understand what a theater is: Jaime Alazraki, *La prosa narrativa de Borges* (Madrid: Biblioteca Románica Hispánica, 1968), p. 98.