

# Borges' Refutation of Nominalism in "Funes el memorioso"

Simone de Beauvoir recalls that when she first made the acquaintance of Jean-Paul Sartre he, then still a young man, proudly and somewhat hubristically declared that when he became older he wanted to be Stendhal and Spinoza (*Cérémonie* 182, 228). Not satisfied with the dream of being merely a great writer or a great philosopher, Sartre hoped to pursue both academic vocations at the same time. For him, this meant not merely writing both philosophical and literary works but also sometimes combining the two. For instance, in order to illustrate a philosophical point, he at times gave literary character sketches such as that of the waiter or the coquette in *L'Être et le néant*. Conversely, he incorporated philosophical ideas to good effect into his plays and novels such as his portrayal of existential freedom in *Les monches* or his account of intersubjective human relations in *Hiis clos*. In fact, it was by means of these literary genres that his philosophical theories found perhaps their most eloquent expression. Consequently, it is not uncommon for commentators to go to his literary works in search of information to supplement the official philosophical statements of Sartre's views.

Sartre's willingness to blur the lines of demarcation that separate the humanities disciplines has, however, not always been seen favorably. There is, for instance, an unfortunate prejudice among philosophers in the Anglo-American world to discount literary works as modes of expression inappropriate for philosophical investigation, and Sartre himself was frequently the victim of this kind of dismissive thinking. However, since in addition to his literary texts, he also wrote purely philo-

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sophical works such as *L'Être et le néant* and the *Critique de la raison dialectique*, the philosophical side of his dual identity was soundly established, and he was able to assure for himself some measure of philosophical credibility. Yet, it is doubtful whether his name would ever be mentioned in philosophy departments today if these two works had never been written and his reputation had remained primarily that of a *littérateur*.

The situation of Jorge Luis Borges is, however, quite different. Like Sartre, Borges employed literary forms in order to illustrate philosophical ideas. But unlike Sartre, Borges never deviated from genres traditionally associated with comparative literature, and aside from a few short essays he never wrote a purely philosophical work. For this reason, unlike Sartre, Borges has not been perceived as a philosopher in his own right, and his works have rarely been investigated for their philosophical meaning and significance. The few attempts to trace the philosophical import of Borges' thought<sup>1</sup> have not been generally taken up and acclaimed, and Borges today still remains a largely unrecognized source of insight among professional philosophers. The present essay is a small attempt to correct this neglect of the philosophical side of Borges' academic identity.

Some of Borges' most philosophical texts are the short stories or *cuENTOS* originally published individually and later collected in the anthologies *Ficciones* (1944) and *El Aleph* (1949). These collections along with some of his other works have earned Borges the reputation of being one of the foremost exponents of Latin American fantastic literature. It is well known that in his stories Borges posits fantastic or imaginary worlds, but what is less well known is that these worlds are often based on philosophical theories. Borges' procedure is to use a particular philosophical doctrine as a point of departure and then to create a world based on it. Then in the course of the *cuENTO*, he examines the problems or contradictions which arise in such a world. Thus, he gives in the form of a short story what can be seen as a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* argument against a given philosophical position. The story allows him to bring out the consequences of a given position and to illustrate them with a character or situation in a way that a philosophical treatise can only do imperfectly with limited examples.

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Aghearna, Champeau, Jaén.

In the present essay, I would like to explore the philosophical elements in the *cuento*, "Funes el memorioso"<sup>2</sup> (1942) from *Ficciones*. This story is about a young Uruguayan who has the ability to perceive and remember everything down to the tiniest detail. He is in possession of a superhuman perceptual apparatus and an infallible memory. The original inspiration for the story apparently came from the experience of insomnia from which Borges occasionally suffered (Cf. Shaw 45). The heightened sense of awareness and consciousness that is the result of insomnia is similar to the condition of Funes. This explains Borges' otherwise obscure description of the story as "una larga metáfora del insomnio" (Cf. Burgin 45-47). There are striking similarities between the abilities of the fictional character, Funes the memorious, and the philosophical doctrine of nominalism and the fundamental intuitions that guide it. The central claim of the present essay is that the point of Borges' story here is (a) to refute nominalism *via* the person of Funes the memorious. By analyzing the perceptual and cognitive capacity of Funes, Borges implicitly criticizes nominalism. But this is by no means merely a superfluous criticism of a philosophical position that has no representatives and has long since been recognized as untenable, but rather in this refutation of nominalism Borges indicates certain positive facts about human cognition and knowing. The story is also intended (b) to provide an argument for the dialectical nature of human cognition which requires both universality and particularity. Borges' criticism of nominalism here brings him into one of the most important discussions in both the philosophical tradition and recent analytic philosophy. Thus, this essay can be seen as an attempt to locate Borges in this philosophical debate, where he has generally never been recognized as a legitimate participant.

# I.

Nominalism is, of course, an age old philosophical doctrine which has made periodic appearances in the history of philosophy. According to this view, the only things that are real are particulars or individual entities. Grounded in common sense, nominalism claims that individual things such as trees or rocks which we can perceive with our senses have an ontological status in the world that abstract concepts such as "justice" or "the good" do not. The mind's grouping of entities into

<sup>2</sup> The story, "Funes el memorioso", originally appeared in *La Nación*, Buenos Aires, junio 7 de 1942.

general categories or concepts is considered wholly arbitrary with no grounding in the individual entities themselves. Thus, for the nominalist, abstract ideas are merely subjective, appearing only in the mind of individual thinkers, whereas individual objects of perception have an independent existence apart from the perceiving subject. General concepts are considered to be mere names or "*nominates*" with no ontological reality of their own. Nominalism can thus be called "particularism" since it attempts to construct a metaphysics and an epistemology on the basis of particulars alone.

Nominalism is in a sense related to empiricism which insists that all knowledge ultimately derives from the perception of individual sensible entities. But in contrast to the empiricists and conceptualists, nominalism claims that abstract ideas, whose primary characteristic is universality, are nothing more than abstractions from a number of individual perceptions. In other words, like the empiricists, nominalism argues that the abstract concept "dog" is formed in one's mind only after one has perceived a number of individual dogs and then has performed the mental act of abstracting from them. Thus, the individual perceptions are primary and the abstract concepts, derivative. However, unlike empiricism, nominalism claims that such abstract concepts have no independent ontological reality apart from the mind. Here we can note that the question concerns not merely language but also perception and the relation between the two.

In the story "Funes the Memorious," Borges alludes to Locke, and when we examine this allusion carefully we can see that he uses Locke's criticism of nominalism as his starting point here. Borges tells us of Locke's notion of a language of particulars:

Locke, in the seventeenth century, postulated (and rejected) an impossible language in which each individual thing, each stone, each bird and each branch, would have its own name. (93)

The passage to which Borges refers comes from Locke's famous *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. There, Locke briefly discusses the idea of a nominalist language of particulars. For the nominalist, abstract concepts do not adequately represent things in the empirical world. Thus, if our goal is to make language veridical, it would be desirable to purge language as far as possible of general concepts such that it could more accurately reflect what is actually given in our perception. This would involve having individual words for every individual thing or even every individual perception. Locke gives three reasons for rejecting the notion of such a nominalist language.

The first and most obvious reason that Locke gives is that a language that contained only particulars would defy the human capacity of memory. If we had a particular word for every individual object, we would simply not be able to remember them all. In so far as new objects are always coming into existence, our dictionaries would be infinite. "First," Locke writes,

it is impossible that every particular thing should have a distinct peculiar name... it is beyond the power of human capacity to frame and retain distinct ideas of all the particular things we meet with: every bird and beast men saw; every tree and plant that affected the senses, could not find a place in the most capacious understanding. (14)

Borges uses this objection as the very premise of the story. He invites the reader to suppose that sensory perception and memory can be infallible, and a story based on fantasy is the perfect vehicle for this. In order to make the best possible case for nominalism, Borges here creates a fictional character, Funes, who has the ability to perceive and remember individual entities impeccably. By ignoring Locke's objection, Borges is able better to draw out the consequences of the nominalist picture.

The second reason for the rejection of this nominalist language of particulars is that this degree of linguistic particularity would undermine communication, which is presumably the very purpose of language. In such a language, says Locke, we would often use words for individual objects with which our interlocutors were not familiar, and for this reason they would not recognize the word which stood for such objects. When I alone have

the ideas in my mind, the names of them could not be significant or intelligible to another, who was not acquainted with all those very particular things which had fallen under my notice. (15)

In other words, we would not be able to understand one another since our vocabulary would overlap only to the extent that our experience overlaps. We would thus each in large measure be in possession of a private language based primarily on objects that we were familiar with. If Funes were to give a different name to each and every one of his perceptions, then even though he could remember all the perceptions and their names himself, we would not be able to understand him.

The third counterargument Locke gives is that a language of particulars would in no way serve the ends of science or knowledge. Although all knowledge is ultimately based on individual perceptions, according to Locke, knowledge itself is more than this:

Thirdly, but yet, granting this also feasible, (which I think is not,) yet a distinct name for every particular thing would not be of any great use for the improvement of knowledge: which, though founded in particular things, enlarges itself by general views; to which things reduced into sorts, under general names, are properly subservient. (15)

Knowledge is not merely a catalogue of particulars, but rather general rules of relations and categorization of individual things. The point of Borges' story, "Funes the Memorioso," is to demonstrate precisely this. The story works with the hypothesis of an individual who can perceive and remember all particulars he has ever encountered. Borges takes up the criticisms of Locke and tries to show how, despite a virtually infinite capacity for the perception and retention of particulars, such a concept of cognition in the final analysis turns out to be self-refuting.

## II.

The actual story of "Funes the Memorioso" concerns Borges' fleeting acquaintance with Ireneo Funes, a young Uruguayan, who is the illegitimate son of a simple ironing woman. The story represents a kind of brief biography or testimonial on the life of Funes. The events are told by Borges as a first person narrator, which seems to give this *ficción* a sense of historical veridicality (Cf. Shaw 46). Borges recounts that he "never saw him more than three times" (87),<sup>3</sup> and of these three occasions we are told in detail about the first and the last which are the most significant. The goal of the present section is to examine each of these encounters. In a sense, there is very little by way of plot, but rather the essential part of the story is constituted by Borges' philosophical reflections on Funes and his uncanny faculties of perception and memory. Borges begins with a brief prefatory paragraph which announces the story's main theme.

In the opening paragraph, Borges obliquely describes the character of Funes and while doing so repeats several times the verb "to remember" [*recordar*]. The first line reads,

I remember [*recuerdo*] him (I have no right to utter this sacred verb, only one man on earth had that right and he is dead) with a dark passion flower in his hand, seeing it as no one has ever seen it. (87)

Without mentioning his name, Borges alludes to Funes here right at the start; he is introduced as the one man on earth who has the right to use

<sup>3</sup> The parenthetical page references in the text refer to *Labyrinth*.

the verb "to remember" which Borges nevertheless employs over and over again. Our first image is of Funes contemplating a flower with his infinite perception. Borges continues his initial description of Funes, repeating the same verb again and again:

I remember [*recuerdo*] him, with his face tautum and Indian-like and singularly remote, behind the cigarette. I remember [*recuerdo*] (I think) his angular, leather-braiding hands. I remember [*recuerdo*] near those hands a maté gourd bearing the Uruguayan coat of arms. I remember [*recuerdo*] a yellow screen with a vague lake landscape in the window of his house. I clearly remember [*recuerdo*] his voice. (87)

Likewise in his description of his initial encounter with Funes, Borges once again repeats the verb "to remember":

I remember [*recuerdo*] his baggy gaucho trousers, his rope-souled shoes. I remember [*recuerdo*] the cigarette in his hard face, against the now limitless storm cloud. (88)

The continual use of this verb clearly foreshadows the most important element of the character of Funes—his prodigious mnemonic powers; but there is more to it than this. Borges continually uses the same verb and with it brings together a number of scattered and seemingly chaotic memories that he has of Funes. The point of this repetition is to underscore his own impoverished memory, which represents what is normal for human cognition, in contrast with the memory of Funes. Borges must add parenthetically "I think" in order to qualify his memory and to note its finitude and possible inaccuracy. Borges can only remember fleeting things and miscellaneous details about the person of Funes, but he admits that he likewise has forgotten many things. By contrast, Funes could remember every word and every detail of each of his meetings with Borges.

The initial encounter with Funes took place in 1884 when the young Borges<sup>4</sup> was visiting his cousin Bernardo Haedo in Fray Bentos, a small Uruguayan town near the Argentine border. In his description of the first encounter, Borges underscores the weakness and finitude of his own memory and perception many times and in many different ways.

1) The first example of Borges' forgetfulness concerns the date of the original encounter. Borges writes, "My first memory [*recuerdo*] of Funes is very perspicuous. I can see him on an afternoon in March or February of the year 1884" (87). In this passage Borges' memory falters; he is not sure whether the initial meeting took place in the month of February or

<sup>4</sup> The biographical aspect of the story is, of course, anachronistic given that Borges was only born in 1899.

March. This is one of the many details that Borges has forgotten since he has concentrated his memory on what are for him the essential aspects of the encounter. Normal human memory is selective, whereas that of Funes, which knows no principle of selection or organization, is infinite, encompassing and retaining everything it comes into contact with.

1) Borges and his cousin were riding horseback from "the San Francisco ranch" trying to arrive at their destination before the onset of an imminent storm. In the description of the oncoming storm there is the first of many images of darkness which run throughout the story: "After a sultry day, an enormous slate-colored storm had hidden the sky" (88). The "slate-colored" storm clouds had already rendered the day dark, but with the approach of Funes the darkness increases:

We entered an alleyway that sank down between two very high brick sidewalks. It had suddenly got dark. I heard some rapid and almost secret footsteps up above; I raised my eyes and saw a boy running along the narrow and broken path (*estrella y rota urdida*) as if it were a narrow and broken wall (*estrella y rota pared*). (88)

2) The running figure is the mysterious Funes, whose location elevated above Borges and his cousin suggests some kind of superiority which is as yet undefined. At face value it seems that the darkness images with which Funes is always associated are a negative reflection on the cognitive capacities of Borges when compared to those Funes, but this is only a part of the story since it also suggests an ignorance on the part of Funes that is likewise as yet unexplained.

3) Another important aspect about this passage is the repetition of the word "narrow and broken" (*estrella y rota*). An incline rises up beside Borges and his cousin like a wall, which means that they are on the same level as it. They share the same normal human powers of cognition and perception which are continually contrasted with those of Funes. The incline, which runs parallel to them, is portrayed as "narrow and broken" (*estrella y rota pared*), a description which corresponds to the limited and fragmentary human capacity to perceive and remember. By contrast Funes is located above the "narrow and broken" incline and runs along on top of it as an indication of his complete and non-fragmentary powers of perception and memory.

The foreshadowing continues in Borges' description of the brief verbal exchange between his cousin and Funes that took place during this first encounter:

Bernardo cried to him unexpectedly: "What time is it, Irene?" Without consulting the sky, without stopping, he replied: "It's four minutes to eight, young Bernardo Juan Francisco". (88)

Borges underscores once again the frailty of his own perception: "I am so unperceptive that the dialogue I have just related would not have attracted my attention had it not been stressed by my cousin" (88). Even though he had been a witness to the exchange, Borges hardly perceived it. This is the normal state of the human mind which must filter out and limit much of what the sense organs actually perceive. Borges learns from his cousin that Funes is a local curiosity due to his strange asocial habits and his uncanny ability of remembering everyone's name and knowing exactly what time it is without the benefit of looking at a clock or the location of the sun. These capacities prefigure what happens to Funes later; it is as if he always had a certain latent proclivity which was waiting to be activated. This concludes the description of the first encounter.

Borges then recounts two fleeting glimpses of Funes which collectively constitute the next encounter. Three years later in 1887 Borges returns to Fray Bentos and learns that the idiosyncratic Funes has been paralyzed as a result of a fall from a horse. Once again the verb "to remember" [*recordar*] is employed:

I was told he had been thrown by a half-tamed horse on the San Francisco ranch and was left hopelessly paralyzed. I remember [*recuerdo*] the sensation of uneasy magic the news produced in me. (89)

The glimpses that Borges catches of Funes in his paralyzed condition seen, in keeping with the local gossip, to be sad ones:

Twice I saw him behind the iron grating of the window, which harshly emphasized his condition as a perpetual-prisoner: once, motionless, with his eyes closed; another time, again motionless, absorbed in the contemplation of a fragrant sprig of *santonica*. (89)

Here nothing is mentioned yet of his remarkable abilities, but by contrast Funes is portrayed as a prisoner. Deprived of the power to move and to take care of himself although still a young man, he evokes a melancholy image of consumption and decay. Borges does not elaborate on these brief encounters.

As Borges tells us himself, it is the final encounter which represents the crux of the story. The occasion for the meeting is Borges' errand to the home of Funes to pick up two Latin books that he had loaned the paralyzed man. Upon learning that Borges had in his possession a Latin dictionary as well as a few Latin texts, Funes writes a polite and formal request to borrow them on the seemingly naive pretext of learning Latin with their help. Borges describes his incredulity:

I did not know whether to attribute to insolence, ignorance or stupidity the idea that the arduous Latin tongue should require no other instrument than a dictionary; to disillusion him fully, I sent him the *Gradius ad Panisum* of Quicherat and the work [sc. *Naturalis historia*] of Pliny. (90)

Borges is then unexpectedly notified *per telegram* that his father is ill and that he must return to Argentina at once. In the evening before embarking on the ship which is due to sail the next morning, Borges goes to the home of Funes to collect his books. Once again the imperfection of his memory is underscored by the fact that he had forgotten about the books, although only a week had passed: "When I packed my valise, I noticed the *Gradius* and the first volume of the *Naturalis historia* were missing" (90).

When Borges arrives at the home of Funes, the images of darkness are repeated immediately in the description of Funes' living quarters. Borges recounts, Funes' mother

told me Irene was in the back room and I should not be surprised to find him in the dark, because he knew how to pass the idle hours without lighting the candle. I crossed the tile patio....the darkness seemed complete to me. (90)

Here it is clear that although Funes is associated with obscurity, the darkness is not perceived by him but rather by Borges, the one perceiving him. The narrator, Borges, says explicitly, the darkness "seemed complete to me," thereby underlining the subjective nature of his impression. It is only when Borges comes into contact with Funes that he perceives the obscurity. When he is alone, he is not aware of his limited capacities because the fallibility of perception often escapes the notice of common sense. The image seems to suggest that Borges' sensory faculties are in darkness in comparison with those of Funes. But as we shall see, the darkness images also have an ironic meaning which reflects negatively on Funes. Likewise, the fallibility of Borges' memory is underlined: "I shall not try to reproduce the words, which are now irrecoverable" (91). He cannot recall all of the dialogue on that night but must recount it fragmentarily. His general statement here underscores the fact that all human perception and memory are fragmentary and that information is always lost in both memory and perception.

The secret of Funes' condition is that after the fall from the horse "his perception and his memory were infallible" (91). Thus, although his body was paralyzed by the fall, these two faculties were rendered infirm. Borges recounts the story that he heard in the dark thus: "He told me that before that rainy afternoon when the blue-grey horse threw

him, he had been what all humans are: blind, deaf, addle-brained, absent-minded" (91). Although Funes is describing the seemingly terrible event that left him paralyzed in the bloom of youth, he nevertheless cannot recount the story without remembering the seemingly insignificant details that it was a rainy afternoon and that the horse was blue-grey in color. Borges relates as follows the essential point of the accident, which constitutes the basic premise of the whole story:

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 present was almost intolerable in its richness and sharpness, as were his most distant and trivial memories. (91)

His perception and memory reached unknown levels of acuity: "the least important of his memories was more minute and more vivid than our perception of physical pleasure or physical pain" (94). The accident with the horse is the device that Borges uses to create a fictional instantiation of a philosophical theory, namely nominalism or particularism.

### III.

Funes the memorious is consistently portrayed in terms reminiscent of nominalism. For Funes, as for the nominalist, the most real things are the particulars which he perceives with his sensory apparatus and which he stores in his memory. The fundamental characteristic of knowledge according to nominalism is, of course, particularity since it is concrete particular images or representations which are given in perception and memory. This is precisely what characterizes the cognition of Funes:

We, at one glance, can perceive three glasses on a table; Funes, all the leaves and tendrils and fruit that make up a grape vine. He knew by heart the forms of the southern clouds at dawn on 30 April 1882, and could compare them in his memory with the mottled streaks on a book in Spanish binding he had only seen once and with the outlines of the foam raised by an oar in the Río Negro the night before the Quebracho uprising. (91-92)

He perceives and remembers every detail of every given sensory perception. Borges underscores the aspect of particularity several times since it is precisely this which proves to be problematic.

Borges tells of Funes' attempt to construct a language "analogous" or similar to Locke's nominalist language of particulars: "Funes once projected an analogous language, but discarded it because it seemed too

general to him, too ambiguous" (93). A language which consists only of particulars is too general for Funes since his perception is so acute that even what we normally consider to be individual entities seem to him to be different over time and from different perspectives. Borges writes, "Funes remembered not only every leaf of every tree of every wood, but also every one of the times he had perceived or imagined it" (93). Thus, for Funes to give a specific name to an individual leaf would still be a generalization since the leaf itself appears to him as various. Every image and perception is individual; there are always slight variations which our sensory apparatus generally ignores but which are nevertheless present. Funes, by contrast, is able to perceive vividly the slightest variations in the different perceptual images of a leaf. Borges uses the example of various individual perceptions of a single dog to illustrate the level of particularity at which Funes' cognition functions: "it bothered him 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)" (93-94). Funes' perception is so acute that the individual perceptions of something appear so different as to be independent ontological entities which would require individual words in a nominalist language. Borges continues, "His own face in the mirror, his own hands, surprised him every time he saw them" (94). Even the slightest variations of the surface of his skin were major alterations for Funes.

Yet a further level of particularity involves the fact that each individual image for Funes is associated with an individual feeling of his own bodily state: "These memories were not simple ones; each visual image was linked to muscular sensations, thermal sensations, etc." (92). Thus, when Funes recalled, for example, the image of a dog he had seen the previous day, he would simultaneously remember the feeling of hunger or the pain of a headache that he experienced at precisely the same moment of the original perception. Even if Funes were to have two images which in themselves were so similar as to verge on identity, then they would still be for him quite distinct due to his own internal perceptions which he associated with them. Given these descriptions of Funes and his ability to distinguish seemingly infinite levels of particularity, there can be little doubt that he is intended to embody the nominalist doctrine.

### IV.

In order to offer a criticism of nominalism by means of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, Borges creates in the form of a fictional story a char-



acter whose world is precisely what the nominalist asserts it is. Borges invites us to assume that the nominalist theory of ontology and human cognition is correct. Let us suppose that it is individual things which have true ontological reality and that all knowing is ultimately grounded in the perception of individual sensible entities. Let us even imagine that our perception and memory are infallible. Given these assumptions, what would be the nature of our cognition? Given the nominalist conception of ontology, what would individual entities amount to in the final analysis? The finite perspective of Borges, the narrator, represents the truth of human cognition of which empirical knowledge of particulars is only a part. Borges can perceive individual entities, albeit not as sharply as Funes, but he is also in possession of universal concepts. The point of the character of Funes the memorious is to show that a fully consistent nominalism, by eliminating general concepts, renders thought impossible.

Borges reduces nominalism to absurdity by indicating the infinite levels of particularity that are involved in sense perception. Nominalism, strictly speaking, insists on the ontological priority of individual things, and for this reason a nominalist language would be a language of proper names. The critical question that Borges poses with the character of Funes is why particularity must stop at the level of individual entities. There is a certain arbitrariness at work here since, as the character of Funes demonstrates, even the ontological reality of individual entities would be called into question if one were acutely aware of the differences in the manifold perceptions of an individual object. Thus, one single dog would become a manifold of dogs when perceived at different times or from different perspectives. There is no bottom to the levels of particularity to which acute perception can penetrate, but rather each level dissolves into a new one *ad infinitum*. The result would be the disappearance of individual entities altogether into the infinity of perceptual particulars. Nominalism thus ultimately ends up with neither an epistemological nor an ontological theory but rather with a chaotic manifold of infinite particularity. The figure of Funes represents this absurdity to which nominalism is reduced.

Borges continues by emphasizing the one-sidedness of the nominalist model. He writes that, despite the powerful perception and memory of Funes, the infinite acuity of these faculties hinders him from genuine thinking: "I suspect, however, that he 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 immediate in their presence" (94). Funes, the embodiment of radical nominalism, has

only the capacity to perceive, i.e. the faculty governed by particularity, but he lacks the ability to think and to conceive of universal terms. Borges writes,

He was, let us not forget, almost incapable of ideas of a general, Platonic sort....it [was] difficult for him to comprehend that the generic symbol *dog* embraces so many unlike individuals of diverse size and form. (93)

Knowledge is not merely the simple machine-like accumulation and retention of particulars. For Borges, both universality and particularity are required for human cognition. To be sure, one needs individual perceptions, but these are meaningless unless they can be categorized and ordered. The images of darkness that accompany Funes are not merely a negative reflection on normal human cognition but rather they represent Funes' genuine ignorance of general terms.

One example of Funes' inability to think abstractly is mathematics. The abstract notion of number escapes him in that he thinks that a system of numbering is merely a series of individual signs. Thus, given that any sign can be replaced by any other, he devises his own system. Borges explains,

He told me that in 1886 he had invented an original system of numbering and that in a very few days he had gone beyond the twenty-four-thousand mark....His first stimulus was, I think, his discomfort at the fact that the famous thirty-three gauchos of Uruguayan history should require two signs and two words, in place of a single word and a single sign. He then applied this absurd principle to the other numbers. 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*, *Olinar*, *subphur*, *the reins*, *the whale*, *the gas*, *the cauldron*, *Nipollon*, *Agustín de Vedia*. In place of five hundred, he would say *nine*. Each word had a particular sign, a kind of mark. (92-93)

Funes conceives of numbers as merely particular entities, such as perceptions of sense, a tree, a table, etc., but by so doing he fails to understand conceptually the nature of numbers which is bound up in their quantitative relation to one another. Borges recounts his criticism of Funes' system which the latter could not understand: "I tried to explain to him that his rhapsody of incoherent terms was precisely the opposite of a system of numbers. I told him 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*. Funes did not understand me or refused to understand me" (93).

Borges returns to the example of language and recounts that with his infallible memory Funes could effortlessly learn foreign languages with the aid of a dictionary alone: "With no effort, he had learned English, French, Portuguese and Latin" (94). Certainly it would be a great advantage when learning a foreign language if one never forgot a single word, form, ending or prefix once learned, but yet language acquisition is more than rote memory; it is also the ability to order individual instances under abstract grammatical rules and then to apply those rules. One might, for example, know by heart the endings for the dative case in a given language, but one would never be able to apply them in individual instances if one did not know when the dative case is employed, that is, if one did not know the abstract rules which govern the dative case. Moreover, it is difficult to see how Funes would be able to understand or correctly use certain abstract terms. For example, the word "dog" and the word "wolf" would be difficult for him to distinguish since his perceptions of the empirical entities which correspond to these terms are so varied and indeed confused and mixed together. Words at higher levels of abstraction such as "quality," "the state," or "justice" would be incomprehensible to him.

The vividness of his perceptions renders the world of Funes a manifold chaos which leaves him no rest. This explains his need for darkness, for it is only in darkness that he can find some repose from the intense perceptions to which he is continuously subject. Here once again we must recall Borges' own experience of insomnia. In the story, the narrator Borges recounts,

It was very difficult for him to sleep. To sleep is to turn one's mind from the world; Funes lying on his back on his cot in the shadows, could imagine every crevice and every moulding in the sharply defined houses surrounding him.... Towards the east, along a stretch not yet divided into blocks, there were new houses, unknown to Funes. He imagined them to be black, compact, made of homogeneous darkness; in that direction he would turn his face in order to sleep. (94)

Part of the human mental capacity is the ability to select and attend to certain information while at the same time blocking out and ignoring other information which is less essential. The brain automatically attends to certain functions such as the beating of the heart and the contraction and expansion of the lungs. If we were obliged to do these things cognitively each time, then life itself would be virtually impossible since we would not be able to concentrate or focus on anything else, lest our attention be drawn away from the necessary life functions. One could die of a heart attack simply by being distracted for a moment. The situation with Funes is similar. His mind is always bombarded

with a manifold of individual perceptions which he is not able to ignore or block out. His perceptual apparatus is far more acute than that of a normal human being, and he has no way of selecting or organizing the information of his perceptions except cognitively.

The last thing that Borges recounts is the death of Funes: "Ireneo Funes died in 1889, of congestion of the lungs" (95). The date is two years after Borges' final meeting with him and some 3-4 years after his fall. Borges intentionally gives us Funes' date of birth as 1868, which would make him twenty-one at his death. The premature death suggests the impossibility of life with a perceptual apparatus like that of Funes.<sup>5</sup> This seems to be confirmed by what Borges himself says of the story: "se trata de un joven campesino del Uruguay que tiene una memoria extraordinaria y muere porque no puede olvidar nada" (Cf. Alazraki *Prosa* 45). Moreover, the manner of his death, "congestion of the lungs," suggests the result of an overabundance of some substance that the body cannot adequately dispose of or regulate (Shaw 48). In the case of Funes, it was an overload of sensible particulars which his mind could not order or organize. The fact of Funes' early death thus suggests the implausibility of the nominalist model.

The Western tradition of epistemology and metaphysics has been concerned with the issue of universality and particularity since its inception. Seen historically, there has been a tendency to gravitate towards one end of the issue or the other. Nominalism itself, with its denial of the ontological validity of universal terms and its emphasis on particularity, is a good example of this. Conversely, realism, which emphasizes the universal aspect of cognition and thus abstracts from experience, represents the antipode to nominalism. The story of Funes the memoriosus is more than just a refutation of nominalism, for while refuting this position, it also makes a crucial point about the dialectical nature of human cognition. The character of Funes, on the one hand, demonstrates the chaos of manifold perceptions in the absence of abstract universal categories and, on the other hand, ironically shows the loss of detail or particularity that is necessary for all thinking. In other words, in order to think universal terms, one must necessarily sacrifice precision in perception since one must overlook and ignore certain perceptual differences in order to think abstractly. Thus, all knowing ironically requires a kind of ignorance or forgetfulness of perceptual par-

<sup>5</sup> See Wheelock: "The Aleph is finally impossible, and the nominalist must ultimately perish of 'pulmonary congestion'" (122).



ticularity. Borges says, "nuestro vivir es...una educación del olvido."<sup>6</sup> The coherence and lucidity of Borges the narrator is attributable to the very fact of his forgetfulness. He is able to tell the story since he has the ability to pick out certain relevant facts and arrange them in an orderly way, by so doing forgetting countless other irrelevant details which Funes would remember. The story thus demonstrates the futility of both positions that occupy the opposite extremes of the epistemological and ontological spectrum. It demonstrates that true knowledge is dialectical in nature, requiring both some information about sensible particulars as well as universal concepts. As Kant says in his own slogan-like fashion, "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind." (A 51, B 75) A non-dialectical approach which emphasizes particularity at the expense of universality or vice versa results, as Borges' literary *reductio* has demonstrated, in contradictions and absurdity.

#### V.

Funes is, for Borges, a symbol of infinity, the infinity of sensible particulars. On the one hand, the infinity can be awe-inspiring. It represents something astonishing, beyond human comprehension. Borges writes,

The two projects I have indicated (an infinite vocabulary for the natural series of numbers, a useless mental catalogue of all the images of his memory) are senseless, but they betray a certain stammering grandeur (93)

Since this infinity is something awe-inspiring and fantastic, Funes himself is portrayed as someone wise and venerable: "He seemed to me as monumental as bronze, more ancient than Egypt, older than the prophecies and the pyramids" (94). Funes is a kind of ancient sage whose face is "singularly remote" (87). He seems to be like the philosopher of Aristotle, abstracted from the mundane world and absorbed in the ethereal realm of pure thought; but yet the truth of the matter is precisely the opposite of this since he cannot think or contemplate abstract ideas but rather is absorbed in the chaotic world of a manifold of sensible images. His knowledge of particulars makes him something mystical, like an ancient oracle or like Vergil's priestess, the Sybil, in the *Aeneid*:

<sup>6</sup> "La postulación de la realidad". *Discusión*. OC 1: 218.

His voice was speaking in Latin; his voice (which came from the darkness) was articulating with morose delight a speech or prayer or incantation. The Roman syllables resound in the earthen patio; my fear took them to be indecipherable, interminable. (90)

His words are like the mystical prophecies delivered in verse by the Sybil. His room, like the cave of the Sybil, was an "earthen patio" which was dark, and "smelled vaguely of dampness" (91). Funes' voice comes to Borges mystically out of the obscurity: "out of the darkness, Funes' voice went on talking to me" (92). It was as if Funes with his superhuman powers were, like the Sybil, possessed by a god or rather by the goddess Mnemosyne. Like many demigods, he is the offspring of a simple mortal mother and an unknown, perhaps divine, father.

Although the infinity can display a kind of "grandeur" and can be awe-inspiring, it can, on the other hand, be something negative, something terrifying. Here we find the work's ironic message. Like immortality in "El Immortal" (Cf. Stewart) infinite memory and perception, which at first appear to be a divine gift, in fact turn out to be a curse. Borges constantly conveys his astonishment at the abilities of Funes, but ultimately this astonishment is undercut and transformed into something horrifying: "I thought that each of my words (that each of my movements) would persist in his implacable memory; I was benumbed by the fear of multiplying useless gestures" (94-95). Funes, despite his infinite knowledge of particulars, is constantly associated with the darkness of ignorance. He is not liberated by his superhuman capacities, but on the contrary they render him a prisoner.<sup>7</sup> The price he must pay for an infallible perception and memory is to be a paralytic. His state of paralysis and consumption underscores the futility and untenability of the nominalist line of thought. For Borges, Funes is, like the library of Babel, a symbol not just for any infinity, but for what Hegel calls "the bad infinity."

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Alazraki "Como la inmortalidad, una memoria infalible y total no es una liberación, sino una condena." (*Versões* 120)

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Ebrielul Younes

## Jorge Luis Borges y el patrimonio filosófico oriental

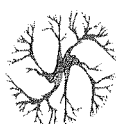
Jorge Luis Borges representa el caso por excelencia del escritor-erudito nutrido por la cultura universal. Aficionado al mundo clásico, tenía una cierta predilección por las culturas del Cercano y del Lejano Oriente, que llegó a conocer mediante la traducción y que ejercieron sobre él una verdadera fascinación.<sup>1</sup> Dicha predilección se debió, tal vez, al deseo de Borges de superar, por medio del "mito" oriental, las normas estrechas impuestas por la cultura occidental como único patrón de la realidad. Las culturas orientales tuvieron así un gran impacto tanto en su pensamiento como en su obra literaria.<sup>2</sup> De este patrimonio oriental nos interesa aquí lo que atañe a la zona conocida como "Medio Oriente", es decir el Oriente islámico, y en particular la influencia de los místicos sufíes en su visión del mundo. Comencemos situando las líneas principales de la posición filosófica de Borges.

Como muchos intelectuales, Borges ha sido atormentado por la situación del ser humano ante los misterios del universo y de la divinidad. Su cosmovisión es la del mundo como laberinto. Heredero de temas eternos, como el tiempo, el espacio y la inmortalidad, Borges se presta a

<sup>1</sup> "...pero quienes poblabon mis mañanas y dieron agradable horror a mis noches fueron el bucanero ciego de Stevenson, agonizando bajo las patas de los caballos, y el traidor que abandonó a su amigo en la luna, y el viajero del tiempo, que trajo del provenir una flor marchita, y el genio encarcelado durante siglos en el cántaro salomónico, y el profeta velado del Jorasan, que detrás de las piedras y de la seda ocultaba la lepra". ("Evaristo Carriego", OC I: 101).

<sup>2</sup> "Creo que mis inspiradores han sido los libros que he leído y los que no he leído también. Toda la literatura anterior. (...) He estado también muy interesado por el sufismo. De modo que todo eso ha influido en mí, pero no sé hasta dónde. He estudiado esas religiones, o esas filosofías orientales como posibilidades para el pensamiento o para la conducta; o las he estudiado desde un punto de vista imaginativo para la literatura. Pero yo creo que eso ocurre con toda filosofía. (...) He visto más bien en la metafísica una rama de la literatura fantástica. (...) Todo eso me ha interesado, pero como una posibilidad para la imaginación". (Citado en Alazraki 335).

## VARIACIONES BORGES



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