

## Jorge Luis Borges's "Funes the Memorious": A Philosophical Narrative

## **Edmond Wright**

In his initial remarks on language in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke has this to say about the problem of choosing from the chaos of sensation what to give a name to, for it is obvious that, if we were quite arbitrary about it, we could give a name not just to any*thing* but to every instantaneous choice from our sensory experience:

The multiplication of words would have perplexed their use, had every particular thing need of a distinct name to be signified by.

(III, I, 3)

This is a fantasy of an absolute nominalism, in which the Real is taken to be categorizable as an all-embracing infinity of particulars matching an infinity of words. It reminds us of one of Bertrand Russell's comments, that finally, to banish all sameness from the "common" referent, one would have to have a word for every infinitesimal instant of every object, hapax legomena, a language of "once-only-names" (Russell 1923: 85). For example, if I now pick out the present momentary co-existence of this part of this wood-grain in the table in front of me with my finger under the precise conditions of light from the window at this instant of time, and call this chance concatenation "Jabberwocky" or "Wakdjunkaga," it is plain that I shall have to multiply my ontological choice at the very next instant, for that object has already ceased to be, since my finger has moved, the light has changed, and no doubt some of the dust that lay on the table has already been blown away by my breath. As an inevitable result of this profligacy with entities, there will be no end to their number. There will be "an explosion of entities" in the universe, as the philosopher Ernest Sosa would say (1987: 155-87). What immediately strikes any sensible person is the utter uselessness of such a language. Not only would it be drowned in its own meticulousness, but it would have no link with human purposes, social or personal. This is the predicament into which Borges places his Ireneo Funes.

One can reach a similar conclusion another way. You have heard of the monkey typing forever on a typewriter with the result that it would finally type out all of Shakespeare. One can add to that, for if it went on typing to eternity, it would inevitably type out all that could ever be said

PARTIAL ANSWERS 5/1: 33-49 © 2007 The Johns Hopkins University Press

in all those languages that use the Roman alphabet, including not only all of Shakespeare and all books that have ever been written or could be, but all those books with one letter displaced, with two letters displaced, and all the nonsense that could ever be made up, and, of course, the process would be repeated chaotically *ad infinitum*. This, as one can equally readily see, is equally useless to us mortal human beings caught within the valuable limitations of space and time.

These two fantasies concerning language and that which it tries to apply itself to, the Real, provide the starting-points for two of the stories, if we may call them so, of the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges – "Funes the Memorious" and "The Library of Babel." That library, like the sheets produced by the unending typing of the monkeys, contains books of "four hundred and ten pages" each, "each page, of forty lines, each line of some eighty letters which are black in colour" (79–80) and they are made up of twenty-five letters arranged in all the combinations possible. The result is that every book that could possibly be written is included in the library, together with all its possible misprints and rearrangements, including all the nonsensal combinations of the letters. In Borges's fantasy the Library is inhabited by scholars in pursuit of the "catalogue of catalogues" that would provide the guide through the labyrinth.

The word "Babel" brings home the uselessness of both these odd impossibilities – first, the remembering, conceptualizing, and wording of the infinitesimal detail of our sensory experience, and, second, arriving at a language so complete in its writing down that it covers all that could ever be said. Although in their extravagance these fantasies about human conceptualization of the Real appear at different ends of the language spectrum – the former concerned with what is referred to and the latter with the means of referring, both arrive at the same impossible point, a complete naming of all that is in the Real.

We can move to other philosophical modes of rendering the two poles we have here. In ancient philosophy we might talk, on the one hand, of the "discordant and unordered motion," that is, unintelligible matter (Plato, *Timaeus*, 30, a, 4–5), as against the perfection of the intelligible ideal Forms (see Book X of *The Republic*). Kant's famous dictum, "Thoughts without concepts are empty: intuitions without concepts are blind" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A51, B75), reminds us that if concepts were not ultimately based on the sensory experience of the Real, they would have no reference, and therefore no engagement with human concerns. Conversely, if sensory experience, "intuition," were not classified, that is, if no selections were made from it, we would be *metaphorical*- *ly* blind. We would sense all right, like a baby opening its eyes for the first time, experiencing what William James's "someone" called "a big, blooming, buzzing confusion" (1977: 233), but we would not be able to pick out anything, not even ourselves. Yet without access to that chaos, we would have nothing to talk about. So when Borges chose this pair of philosophical themes, indeed, what some would call today "philosophemes," he was knowingly experimenting with them, bringing home to us their intimate connection with our being human through an imaginative exaggeration. One might call several of Borges's stories examples of allegorical hyperbole or hyperbolical allegory, based on paradoxes that inhabit our apparently non-paradoxical world. Indeed, some of Zeno's paradoxes, that of Achilles and the Tortoise for example, are bound up with our attempts as human beings to divide up the world into numerable entities, and, for some of us, to question the deep conviction, arising from unconscious sources, that it can be so divided.

That which is divided is here referred to as "the Real," taken as an undifferentiated Heraclitean flux, a materia prima, Aristotle's hyle (the "wood," the stuff from which all else is selected (Aristotle, Metaphysics, Book H, chapters 1 and 2), Kant's "manifold" (Critique of Pure Reason, A77 B103), Husserl's "substrate" (1973: 130-31), Terence Horgan's and Matjaz Potrc's "jello-world" (Horgan and Potrc, forthcoming). The philosopher Robert Kirk refers to this notion slightingly as "cosmic porridge" (1999: 52-54) because he is convinced that those who hold on to this notion of a material ground (presenting variations from which human beings select what they call entities) have no right to claim that this ground exercises any influence on what is selected; the result, he believes, is that proponents of this view leave themselves with the dilemmas of solipsism and relativism.<sup>1</sup> However, it is relevant here to note Kirk's metaphor as well as the double assonance in his phrase "cosmic porridge" - rhetorical devices that themselves betray the human predilection for finding the repetition of sensory features within the continuum, a characteristic upon which Borges can be said to base his story of the remarkable Funes.

I shall concentrate on the story, "Funes the Memorious." One of the key questions is where its narrative lies – there is no detectable plotline, no *anagnorisis*, so even the structure of a development towards a final transformation is absent.

 $<sup>^{1}</sup>$  Kirk's objection is based on a misunderstanding of the notion of entities-as-sociallyconstructed; there is no space here to pursue the argument — a rebuttal can be found in Wright 2005b: 116–20.

Let me begin with a short outline. The story starts with the narrator riding home in the evening with his cousin on the pampas near Fray Bentos. They descend into a narrow lane. A ragged boy appears, running along a wall above them. The cousin, who is acquainted with the boy, calls out to him the question "What time is it, Ireneo?" The boy, without consulting a watch, cries out immediately in a mocking tone, "It's four minutes to eight, young Bernardo Juan Francisco" (Borges 1970: 87–88).

Notice not only the oddity of the boy being able to give the time whenever he is asked, but the fact of his being able to pinpoint an instant of the continuum of time so securely, as well as the fact that he knows the full name of the person he is addressing. The boy's name is Ireneo Funes. The "pinpointing of an instant of time" is, of course, only possible within a human system of dividing up that continuum, and human systems of dividing it have varied. This fantasy of absolute "accuracy" clearly has wider philosophical implications.

The narrator's life takes him away from Fray Bentos for a few years, but he happens to return and, when he does so, he inquires after the "chronometrical Funes" as he terms him (our question, indeed, is how "metering" a continuum like *chronos* is performed). He discovers that the young man had been thrown from a horse and become paralysed. He glimpses him twice at the window to which he had been brought by his mother at his request: on the first occasion Ireneo has his eyes closed; on the second he is lost in contemplation of "a fragrant sprig of santonica."

Ireneo, hearing by chance that the narrator has brought along some books in Latin (in particular, Pliny's *Naturalis historia*), asks for the loan of them, as well as of a Latin dictionary. The narrator, aware that Ireneo knows no Latin, also sends him a Latin text-book and dictionary, amusedly doubting whether they would be of any use.

Now begins the core of the story, which actually has a plot, which is, in the narrator's words, "no other than the dialogue" he has with Funes – this will also be our reasoned conclusion. The narrator gets an urgent message from Buenos Aires that he must return at once. Remembering that he has lent the books to Funes, he goes round to his house to get them back. As he arrives he hears Funes' mocking voice reciting, in Latin, the first paragraph of the seventh book of the *Naturalis historia*, the subject of which is memory. He goes into the darkened room where Funes is living out his extraordinary life and begins the dialogue that reveals the strange world which Funes now inhabits. While before the fall from the horse he could immediately tell the time and remember the names of anyone to whom he was introduced, following it he can

remember every detail of every experience that he has had, no matter how trivial or minute. Funes, indeed, begins by saying how feeble the examples of extraordinary memories given by Pliny in his book seem to him. Whereas Cyrus, King of the Persians, could call every soldier in his army by name, Funes

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 Rio Negro the night before the Quebracho uprising. (92)

The rest of the tale is taken up with detailing other miraculous results of this fantastic ability. The narrator notes that, whereas we have the ability to remember the simple mathematical forms of circle, triangle, lozenge, and tend to consider them in some way more significant than other shapes, Funes "can do the same with the stormy mane of a pony, with a herd of cattle on a hill, with the changing fire and its innumerable ashes, with the many faces of a dead man through a long wake" (92). The fantasy is thus that he has the ability to select from the stream of his sensory experience any percept he wishes and hold it forever in memory. Where we take that same evidence and help each other to select only what is of use to us, Funes can perceive and remember any instant of that experience regardless of its value either to him or to his fellows. He can be said to be the living apotheosis of a poet, one in whom the vital instrument of creativity is employed to absurd excess. We learn from the poet to perceive where we had only sensed before, but Funes' whole experience has the character of private novelty. He could also be said to be extending to the limit what any ordinary speaker does, for speakers are endeavouring to update their partners in dialogue by inducing them to perceive things in a new way. Thus one could also say that the core instrument of language is always a subversion of current rule.

Funes, unsurprisingly, finds the remembering of such precise and infinitesimally detailed sensory experiences oppressive, which is why he has retreated to a darkened room and spends most of his time in bed. He has no difficulty in filling up that time, for he conducts strange experiments with his remarkable faculty. Here are two of them.

Realising that the use of the decimal system, our counting the numbers in groups of ten, is merely a mnemonic device to enable human beings with their limited powers of memory to recall the numbers more easily, he, with his unlimited memory, sets out to give each number its own

unique name. Instead of saying "eleven," which actually is "one-leave" (that is, "ten and one left over"), he could say "Luis Melián Lafinur"; instead of "twelve," which is actually "two-leave" (that is, "ten and two left over"), he could say "Olimar"; instead of "thirteen" ("three-ten"), he could say "sulphur"; instead of 365, he said "meat blanket." In a few days he goes beyond the 24,000 mark. The narrator protests that this is a "rhapsody of incoherent terms," which he believes is "the opposite of a series of numbers," but Funes does not understand him or "refuse[s] to understand him" (93). Borges's narrator, however, obviously does not realize that decimal, duodecimal, or any other grouping of the numbers is, indeed, merely a mnemonic device to help us cope with the endlessness of the numbers and the uniqueness of each of them. Ireneo's pastime is a mocking hyperbole of the whole notion of number, which is a pure (and impossible) abstraction from the real game of language in which we mutually - and impurely - project the sameness of imaginary units upon our individually differing streams of experience.

The other strange pastime is to take a day of his life and reconstruct it later in its entirety. "Two or three times he had reconstructed a whole day, but each reconstruction had required a whole day to perform" (92). As John Sturrock puts it, "Funes belongs all too fully in time" (110).

Funes himself comments on the state of his memory, comparing it to "a garbage heap" (92). He attempts to bring some order into the chaos by seeking to reduce each of the past days to seventy thousand memories, which would then "be defined by means of ciphers." To this procedure, however, there are impediments:

He was dissuaded from this by two considerations: his awareness that the task was interminable, his awareness that the task was useless. He thought that by the hour of his death he would not even have finished classifying all the memories of his childhood. (93)

The infinite cannot be compressed into the finite. He tries to counter the oppressiveness of his remembering, not only by seeking darkness and isolation, but by trying to concentrate on a minimal sensory intake. On hearing of some new houses that were being built in his street, he determinedly imagines them to be

black, compact, made of homogeneous darkness; in that direction he would turn his face to sleep. He would also imagine himself at the bottom of a river, rocked and annihilated by the current. (94)

Here the story overlaps in its concerns with what was implied in Funes' "chronometrical" ability, for this has further links with the other story, "The Library of Babel." The library is presented as containing an infinite number of books (see p. 34 above), which, because of their very infinity, would therefore be supposed to include statements that placed an identity upon each instant of time that is "now" in the manner of what the mathematician Julius Dedekind referred to as the "cut" - the pointless point that divides the infinity to the left in a continuous line from the infinity to the right; for Funes, it is the "now" that divides the infinity of the past from that of the future. The type of infinity would be the one which in his book on Borges Floyd Merrell classifies as "nondenumerable," as of a continuum, which can only be referred to by the system of complex numbers (and not the simple integers, which extend the "denumerable" type of infinity) (55-56). In the library one of the librarians had an "elegant hope" of a search for a finite order among the books even if it were only a repetition of the total scheme (Borges 86): he is thus in as sad a situation as Funes, for he is condemned from the side of the *word*, as Funes is from the side of the sensory world, to endless, futile frustration. Limits and boundaries cannot be placed fixedly upon a continuum: the finite cannot encompass the infinite.

The last we hear of Funes is his annihilation, in the last sentence of the story: "Ireneo Funes died in 1889, of congestion of the lungs" (95).

The mention of the uselessness of these memories can give us a lead into our analysis. A comment that Funes makes himself can provide an opening:

He was, let us not forget, incapable of ideas of a general, Platonic sort. Not only was it difficult for him to comprehend that the generic symbol *dog* embraces so many unlike individuals of diverse size and form; 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). (92–93)

"It bothered him" – by what most of us would hardly be bothered. What is it, however, to be "bothered"?

If you are bothered about something, then it matters to you, that is, your fears and/or your desires are aroused; it is a question of what action you are to take with regard to the interpretation of the sensory experience you are having. The humblest of organisms do not have this problem: in their case all is performed by instinct. The advanced animals, though, have evolved the learning process. They have a pain/pleasure module that, when activated, places elements from sensory experience into memory and marks them with fear or desire respectively. A single experience does not suffice, of course, to hone an appropriate response, but repeated encounters with the relevant region of the real produce ever more successful responses in action, a matter of feedback, a "from-and-to process," as Roy Wood Sellars puts it (1970: 125), that refines the maintenance of life both for the individual and the species. Jean Piaget called it a continual oscillation between the "accommodations" to the new input and the "assimilations" that are the attempts to conserve what has been learned (352–53). Human beings made the evolutionary leap of allowing an updating from individual to individual by means of language, which for the advanced animals extends only to limited responses to signs.

At the core of language is the proposition: someone *proposes* an updating of our classification, a re-categorization of the Real. It is a dynamic act by the Speaker that may or may not be acceded to, for the Hearer may not agree that the new categorization serves his or her fears and desires. The word *update* itself, used for informing someone, reveals that the transformation occurs through *time*.

Here is a brief recounting of the explanation given in my recent book (Wright 2005b: chap. V). First, Speaker and Hearer begin by taking for granted that they have already singled out a portion of the Real. Notice the paradox: Speaker and Hearer behave as if no updating is required, that part of the Real is *timelessly* single without regard to any individual perspectives, that is, apart from human choice. What they are taking for granted is that they have "counted up to one" and that there is a singular entity before them both, an entity that exists in its singularity for both of them in the same way, independently of their isolating "it" out from the continuum. The phrase "to take for granted" gives this covert collusion away, for "to take for" means to accept something not fully determined AS IF it were so. Consider its use in "It was so dark I took the last step down for the last but one," an unfortunate illusion that led to the speaker suffering a nasty jar. The relevance to suffering is no surprise, for the word "granted" immediately brings in our fears and desires, since "to grant" means to allow, to permit. So to take the singularity of something for granted is to assume for the time being, in an actually uncertain situation, that nothing could disturb that singularity *seriously* for either of us. This blind collusion of ours works on an assumption that the continuum of the Real is already categorized apart from human choice and that its singularity precedes that choice. Nevertheless, the truth is that we are trusting that it is so. There are those who would rather see the aim of language as that of understanding rather than that of the realization of desires, but such an abstraction as "understanding" disguises the prior need for an act of faith, a faith that allows for the real risk of unknown cross-purposes, that is, opposing desires. In other words, they believe that taking for granted is an absolute assurance of agreement – and this is patently an act of blind over-confidence in one's own interpretation.

When Bertrand Russell considered this point he was content to believe that singularity was never impugned. He declared that in the Real "there can be no such thing as vagueness or imprecision; things are what they are, and there is an end of it" (85). His belief is reflected in his conviction that when one has uttered the word "this" in reference to some-thing, one has reached logical and epistemological bedrock. The same conviction can be found in the thought of John McDowell and other contemporary philosophers who believe that the world is "thus-and-so" before we - in co-operation with others - have done any selecting (McDowell 1944: 9, 17). Of a corpse buried in the ground Russell said that it was obvious that there would come a time when everyone would agree that no one would say a corpse remained there. It never occurred to him that human decision (which might involve painful disagreements) could enter into the choice (note 1). The current disputes in England about the re-use of cemeteries are a case in point. Nevertheless, a proposition is begun with both parties assuming that they have converged on something that exists in perfect singularity apart from both of them, whereas the case really is that of two overlapping selections from the Real being treated as one by both sides in the dialogue.

That they are overlapping there is no doubt. An article in last year's *New Scientist* details the extent of the differences in sensory registration from one person to another (Hollingham 40–43). For example, not a single person reading this article is sensing what is before them in the same way as anyone else. Moreover, because our learning histories have been different, we also have differing conceptualizations of what we call the same portions of the Real. After all, we would not talk to each other if we did not. As Wilhelm Dilthey put it, if we understood everything entirely differently, we would not be able to speak, and if we understood everything in exactly the same way, we would not need to speak (Dilthey 1913–1967: VII: 95). There are no given boundaries in the Real: each of us carves up the continuum differently according to our bodily natures and our learning histories.

Once Speaker and Hearer have projected this strictly false assumption that a common, timeless singularity is before them, the Speaker can then attempt to update the Hearer, that is, contradict that assumption. To

illustrate: if I were with you now, I might say to you as Speaker "Here is the lens of my left eye," pointing to it as I spoke. We would then have all agreed on a singularity, part of a living human body, with certain wellknown criteria of classification. Now I update you about "it": "It is not a human lens — it is plastic, artificial, a replacement, working much better than what it replaced." Here we have an informative statement. The proposition began with our getting a rough coincidence of understandings by our taking for granted that there was an existing singularity upon which we all were focussing, but we did that just so that I could bring your perception and understanding nearer to what I believe is a more satisfactory one. Interestingly, there need not be any singularity at all for the proposition to work, and this, as I asserted in my book (Wright 2005b: 118), puts us well within the scope of Ockham's Razor – one can ask which is ontologically the more frugal theory, the one which gets on with merely imagining entities out of an undeniably real continuum, or that which extravagantly believes in that explosion of entities Sosa spoke of? For all that matters — and the word "matters" reminds us of the pressure of our fears and desires - is that the updating go through.

The notion of a perfect singularity is like a catalyst in a chemical combination: it allows the process to take place but it remains logically untouched, timelessly, "un-really" outside the process precisely because it was *imagined* by all of us. This does not imply that the Real is not before us, just that a logical singularity of the "entity," one exactly the same for all, is not.

Counting is therefore an act of co-operative imagination. It is exactly the same when we use money. We *take for granted* that the money has the same value for all of us, and this allows our commerce to go on, but everyone knows that those very bargains that are the basis of that commerce are altering the value of the money we use as we use it. Last week I saw a financial commentator on TV and behind him a Movitype screen was showing the changing value of the dollar, which was fluctuating as he spoke. So too with the reference of our words as we are actually speaking and hearing. The so-called "dictionary meaning" or "*word*-meaning" is a catalyst in the same way, a vitally necessary stand-in for two (or more) "*speaker's* meanings."

But this is the Symbolic we are speaking of. Just as with the dollar, the bargains of our statements, our propositions to each other, are altering the reference of our words as we speak. You can imagine a Movitype screen just above this journal you are looking at showing the changing value of our words as you read what I have written. The enumeration of singular entities involved in our words is a fiction. We have to imagine the singularity of "a referent" in order to speak to each other, but the aim, paradoxically, is to change that 'singularity.' This is why the word "count" is ambiguous: it can mean *to enumerate*, but it can also mean *to matter*. As Aristotle said, what counts as six apples for the seller may not count as six apples for the buyer, for judgements of desire and aversion play their part. In pure mathematics, of course, what we must never do is refer. In Gödel's Proof of the inconsistency of mathematics the paradoxes are produced precisely because he does refer: he makes numbers refer to other numbers, which is not an act of numerate purity.<sup>2</sup>

What about Funes, then? First, let us look at his game with the numbers, the one in which he gave a unique name to each number.

The narrator, we recall, considered his project a "rhapsody of incoherent terms," but Funes' list of proper names for each number actually brings out the fact that the number system is indeed a co-operative fiction of endless singularities. The narrator is taking what is only a mental prop for human beings with limited memories as part of an essential feature of numeration itself when it is, in fact, no such thing. Remove the decimal, the binary (based on 2), the duodecimal (based on 12), the "undevigintal" (based on 19, which is perfectly possible) — if truth be told, remove a system of mnemonics based on any number whatsoever, and we are left with the numbers in all their naked glory, each an abstract singularity worthy of a proper name. Thus Funes' experiment merely provides the numbers with the proper names they deserve, ones which acknowledge their fundamentally *singular* form.

Take Goldbach's Conjecture, as yet mathematically unproved, that every even number is the sum of two prime numbers: take 8 — it is obviously the sum of 3 and 5. I suggest that the solution lies in seeing the problem philosophically, not mathematically. An even number is one divisible by 2, that is, two singularities make it up, and what could be more singular than a prime number, one that defies division? To strengthen this claim, I have added Wright's Conjecture, that every odd number is the sum of three primes. Take 13 — it is the sum of 7, 5 and 3; 21 is the sum of 13, 5 and 3; 43 is the sum of 27, 11, and 5; and so on. Funes has tumbled on the fact that timeless, logical singularity, an utterly fictive freezing of the Real, is what actually characterizes the number system. It represents therefore a perfect narcissism, for it implies that whatever

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> For the way in which this error over reference produces paradoxes such as those of Zeno's, see Wright 2005b: 180–88.

anyone has selected from the Real is not only the same for everybody, but unalterable, including the fiction of their own singularity, their own precious subjecthood. It represents the fiction that the Symbolic's selections are finally and timelessly one's own, instead of being a matter of collusion. Mathematics as a pure fiction can thus be said to be an allegory of pure narcissism. When we use mathematics in the world, however, we are immediately in a situation where the measure of our faith in the other cannot be ignored, and faith is a leap — it necessarily implies risk.

Then consider Funes' bewilderment that a dog seen at 3:14 p.m. from the side could be identified with the dog seen at 3:15 p.m. from the front. This is to ignore the human purpose of selecting those parts of the Real we call dogs rather than these punctiform sights of his. The Forms of "a general Platonic sort" of which Funes could not conceive represent the co-operative imagining that is necessary for dialogue. It is clear that Funes' selections serve no purpose. Funes is at odds with the Symbolic, unable, because of the detail of his experience, to align his selections with those of others. He stands like someone autistic, as one who cannot enter into the imaginary game of the proposition, who cannot project the fiction of a perfect singularity of reference in concert with another person, a fiction which is what a "Platonic Form" can be taken to be.

As I have noted elsewhere (Wright 2005b: 130-31), it seems likely that what Helen Keller unconsciously realized, as she ran her hands under the water from the tap, was not that she had come "to understand what a name was," as Jean Aitchison puts it (96), which is virtually a dormitive explanation (that is, one that constitutes a tautology and is therefore no explanation), but that language began with the understanding that the other's attention, through the word "water," was on the "same" portion of the Real as her own, even though she and her teacher had markedly different perceptions of "it," her teacher having normal sensory access to the world, Helen being deaf and blind. When Helen became versed in the proper use of the sign language after this key incident, she might have been able to update her teacher about the Real in this very case, namely, telling her that the water had been warm. She ceased to behave in an autistic manner from that moment onwards, through being able to play with someone else, the play being that each would take the singularity for granted in order to allow an alteration of it to be communicated. Indeed, all acts of play turn something apparently certain into something else: consider a gambit in chess that looks for all the world like an error of judgement but proves subsequently to be a clever move.

What now emerges is that the mutual collusion required initially in the proposition relies on a species of trust, for the Hearer has temporarily to accept that she and the Speaker have focussed on precisely the same region of the Real, and yet that she has to expect an alteration of it. This species of trust can hardly be said to deserve automatically the imputation of a moral quality, for the Hearer may enter into the collusion blindly, believing superstitiously in the given existence of "the entity" beyond either of their selections. It is not a true faith in the other until the Hearer is prepared to find that the updating constitutes a risk, a risk which may be severe.<sup>3</sup>

Let us look at the implications of the situation. Two persons in all good faith, as we say, are taking for granted, mutually assuming that a single entity, whether a thing or a person, is ontologically present in its singularity, and that through the proposition one has gained a putatively better grasp on it as a result of the other's alteration. The underlying assumption, therefore, is that Hearer can trust Speaker. Let us say that the two are bound by affection, even love. However, because of the everpresent differences at the sensory and conceptual levels, neither can be sure of the implications at a later time. Perhaps both included something in the taking-for-granted that was not so taken by the other. As I have said elsewhere, "What is *implicit* for each cannot all be *explicit* for both" (Wright 1978: 541). To put it another way, what Speaker deemed too negligible to mention was not even within the scope of the other's understanding. Furthermore, the brute Real itself conceals implications that may not emerge until later when unintended consequences show themselves. The "brute Real" contains not only aspects of the external Real, but also unconscious elements within the agents themselves that they might even have disavowed at the moment of initial acceptance of the proposition. There is therefore a risk in every performance of language, for the proposition is its essential component.

We now come to the main point: there is a risk in each one of these linguistic acts of trust. To imagine that a perfect truth has been agreed upon, a fixed promise made, an unconditional law enacted, an absolute rule imposed, is to turn a proper trust or, better, faith in the other, into a pseudo-trust, into — let me put it as bleakly as possible — into a superstition.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See Wright 2005a for Chaucer's exploration of this challenge.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Could one not say that Jacques Lacan's core message is that the Symbolic must be entered into in good faith, while knowing full well that it brings castration with it, that risk

Could we not say that when Freud traces anxiety to the child's inability, like that of Funes, to cope with the flood of stimuli that it encounters, it is struggling with the human language-game that bestows the singularity of an ego, of the other, and of ordinary things, a struggle which is necessarily attended with risk? (Freud 1974: 454). The singularity of all these is never secure, hence the difficulty of escaping from the womb of imaginary unity that apparently began our time in the world. No wonder an ordinary thing can turn uncanny on us, revealing a threat where reassurance of its singularity was "taken for granted," a metaphor of the uncanniness of the self and of the other, of the subject and the other who are irredeemably split.

But there is Funes, overwhelmed by the excitation from the outer world to the point where he retreats into fantasy, into obsession. Is not his attempt to name all the numbers an extraordinary Freudian symptom, a fantasy in which he tries to impose singularity on the very singularitysystem itself? Then his endeavours to classify a whole day and reduce a day to 70,000 memories — are not these obsessive attempts to impose the Symbolic, with an exact and successful completion, upon the dangerous continuum of the ever-changing Heraclitean Real? No wonder he fails. He is an allegorical figure for all superstition, for those with a rage for boundaries to support of a falsely secure identity. Beyond those fantasy-walls they are, of course, in a Kleinian manner projecting those elements of their subjecthood that fail to accommodate the reassuring picture of a unified self that they unconsciously prefer. As a philosopher, I also include among the frankly superstitious all positivists and direct realists who want to see the world as Russell did, as already furnished with recognizable things (as Locke did, see p. 33 above), or as P. F. Strawson does, with individuals, who are ontologically basic to a metaphysics (1959). What is not seen is that we have together to take for granted that there are persons and things in the world, that is, fictively to project a mutual Symbolic, an imaginary metaphysics, but only with the aim of forever updating it to its impossible match with the Real.

to our *jouissance* is in every utterance, every commitment that we make. After all, what is the worth of *commitment* to a promise, a rule, a law, that does not confront the possibility of sacrifice? To accept how language works, what our needful involvement in the Symbolic implies, means accepting that tragedy could be a real outcome. In a comic situation those exposed to unexpected castration can laugh themselves into a new set of fears and desires, a new self, but in tragedy the sacrifice demanded may be the greatest, the sacrifice of all fears and desires – death.

Funes is a person who is congenitally unable to enter a story. In a story we are prepared to accept an updating of our understanding. Most stories, indeed, are about people who resist the transformation of their perceptions, and thus of themselves, with comic, tragic, or tragic-comic results. Funes is unable to do this because his mental condition prevents him from entering into the *mutual* fiction of singling from the Real, the core Symbolic fiction of singular reference which rides on our trust in each other, a trust which is prepared to have its granting in the mutual "taking-for-granted" meet with disappointment, disillusionment, frustration, even suffering — in a word, castration. None of Funes' percepts are mutual; none enter into the shared fiction of singularity; they could never be updated by anyone else, which is the central and initial purpose of our temporarily imagining together that we have a pure co-reference. In consequence, Funes suffers in his neurotic withdrawal from the world, becoming inert inside his darkened room. His physical paralysis becomes a literalization of his neurotic one. Strictly speaking, Funes should not be able to speak at all, whether in Spanish or Latin. In psychoanalytic terms, one may see a refusal of castration powerfully imaged in his desperate reduction of his experience to imagined houses, in which the loving security of *homes* is to be found — houses that are utterly and homogeneously black. He dies, psychosomatically, or in the realization of another metaphor, of the "congestion" of the lungs, the very organs that provide the breath of the mutual word as well as that of the single life.

Furthermore, the narrator, as we have seen, is so bemused by Funes as to be unable to penetrate the philosophical riddle that Borges has laid out for us in what ironically is the narrator's own account. The relation of the narrator to Funes is itself a demonstration of the fact that the mutual trust of language inevitably goes astray. People talk past each other, and their mutual faith must acknowledge that risk. It is not only Funes who is unable to perfect a common understanding in dialogue with a fellow human being. The narrator, though "normal" like the rest of us, is revealed as trapped within the same dilemma, and this places us within it too, open to being called upon to accept unexpected sacrifices demanded by those we loved and with whom we had imagined ourselves to be fully in harmony. Thus, before we compliment ourselves on our luck in being able to forget so much where Funes was condemned to remember, we are reminded that what we remember as significant may not be what our friends or lovers have remembered as significant: one could say that they may suddenly turn into Funes before our eyes, recalling something that we had merely sensed but not actively noticed, something that at that earlier time had been noticed and deemed relevant by them. The *anagnorisis* in this would-be plotless story (see Wright 2005b: 52–56) is our own. There is therefore something to be said against the criticism of Borges by, say, Gabriel Marquez and Carlos Fuentes, for lacking a social commitment (see Alazraki 1987: 5–7), or against Paul de Man's tendency to see his stories as merely '*contes philosophiques*' (1987: 57).<sup>5</sup>

It was mentioned above that Funes is like a *poet* in being able to perceive anew when others remain locked in the everyday. Yet this ability has been enhanced to an absurd degree, that of renewing and extending his perceptions when there is no possibility of their content being usefully passed on to. It can be added that he can also be seen as someone with the skill of the *storyteller*, that of surprising hearers with an unexpected transformation, but a skill equally rendered null and void, his stories having no purchase on the fears and desires of his hearers, on what matters to them. No wonder he described his memories as a "garbage heap." Borges can be said to have told a story about someone who could not tell a story, one who, in addition, demonstrates the way all stories can only live if they impinge upon our hopes and concerns.

If every story contains a transformation, either in some startling final *peripeteia* for the protagonist or, as in the plotless story, diffused throughout for detection by its audience, then the transformation here is a philosophical one of the latter kind. It is an allegory on the misuse of language, on the narcissistic illusion that our personal referents are fixed, unalterable, and a matter of pure voluntary choice, including specifically that of the self, for all the perceptual choices we have learned to make are part of that self and govern its actions. It is a fable about the absence of mutuality.

elw33@hermes.cam.ac.uk

## Works Cited

Aitchison, Jean. 1996. *The Seeds of Speech: Language Origin and Evolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Borges's fantasy is, of course, impossible. He rendered it marginally more plausible by having Funes live a reasonably normal life in his youth; hence, the story having its two parts, one before and one after the accident. If he had had his ability from birth, he would never have been able to enter language at all, never acquired a human self, becoming virtually a feral child (like the Wild boy of Aveyron or Caspar Hauser). There could therefore have been no story, for, within the logic of the fantasy, the narrator would never have been able to discuss "his" plight with "him."

- Alazraki, Jaime. 1987. "Introduction." In *Critical Essays on Jorge Luis Borges*, ed. Jaime Alazraki. Boston, Massachusetts: G. K. Hall, pp. 1–20.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. 1970. *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*. Ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- De Man, Paul. 1987. "A Modern Master." In Critical Essays on Jorge Luis Borges, ed. Jaime Alazraki. Boston, Massachusetts: G. K. Hall, pp. 55–62.
- Dilthey, Wilhelm. 1913–1967. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1974. Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis. Trans. James Strachey. Ed. James Strachey and Angela Richards. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. Vol. I.
- Hollingham, R. 2004. "In the Realm of Your Senses." *New Scientist* (January 31): 40–43.
- Horgan, Terence, and Matjaz Potrc. Austere Realism. (Forthcoming).
- Husserl, Edmund. 1973 [1939]. *Experience and Judgement*. Trans. J. S. Churchill and K. Ameriks. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- James, William. 1977. "Percept and Concept The Import of Concepts." The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition. Ed. John J. McDermott. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 232–43.
- Kirk, Robert. 1999. *Relativism and Reality: A Contemporary Introduction*. London: Routledge.
- McDowell, John H. 1994. *Mind and World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Merrell, Floyd. 1991. Unthinking Thinking: Jorge Luis Borges, Mathematics, and the New Physics. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press.
- Piaget, Jean. 1955. *The Child's Construction of Reality*. Trans. Margaret Cook. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1923. "On Vagueness." Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy 1: 84–92.
- Sellars, Roy Wood. 1970. The Principles, Perspectives, and Problems of Philosophy. New York: Pageant Press International.
- Sosa, Ernest. 1987. "Subjects among Other Things." In *Philosophical Perspectives*, I: Metaphysics, 1987, ed. James E. Tomberlin. Atascadero, California: Ridgeview, pp. 155–87.
- Strawson, Peter F. 1959. *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. London: Methuen.
- Sturrock, John. 1977. *Paper Tigers: The Ideal Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Wright, Edmond. 1978. "Sociology and the Irony Model." *Sociology* 12/3: 523–43.
  - ——. 2005a. "Faith and Narrative: A Reading of 'The Franklin's Tale." *Partial Answers* 3/1: 19–42.
  - ——. 2005b. *Narrative, Perception, Language, and Faith.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.