The Minotaur is Alive and Well: Jorge Luis Borges's "Funes, the Memorious"

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Jorge Luis Borges's short story collection *Ficciones*, an ontological exploration replete with the motifs—dreams, mirrors, labyrinths—that characterize Borges's fiction, is a seminal work widely considered to be his masterpiece and often seen to have signaled the beginning of postmodernity. Here I will focus on one of the stories in *Ficciones*, "Funes, the Memorious," which arose, Borges says in an interview with J. L. Dembo, "as a kind of metaphor for sleeplessness, because I suffered greatly from insomnia" (319). Gene H. Bell-Villada states that Borges "wrote it during a troubled period when [he said] 'I'd close my eyes and find myself imagining the furniture, the mirrors, the house' and try in vain, as poor Funes does, to get to sleep. The piece was written, according to Borges, as a means of staving off insomnia . . . " (107). While "Funes, the Memorious" may be read as a metaphor for the insomnia experienced in a night or a year, it can also be understood as a metaphor for a different kind of wakefulness, the wakefulness brought on by the fear of a universe that is essentially without meaning. What's more, at the same time that the story is a meditation on how memory and forgetting relate to meaningfulness, it can also be read as a critique of modernism.

"Funes, the Memorious" tells of a nineteenth century encounter between the narrator, an Argentine intellectual vacationing in the Uruguayan town of Fray Bentos, and Ireneo Funes, a young country boy who becomes an invalid when he is thrown from a horse. Though Funes's accident leaves him crippled, it also gives rise to his prodigious memory, a memory that allows him to "not only [remember] every leaf on every tree of every wood, but even every one of the times he had perceived or imagined it" (*Ficciones* 114). The narrator tells us,

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> Funes could continuously make out the tranquil advances of corruption, of caries, of fatigue. He noted the progress of death, of moisture. He was the solitary and lucid spectator of a multiform world which was instantaneously and almost intolerably exact. (114)

Funes asks the narrator to lend him some Latin texts, which the uneducated Funes plans to read with only the help of a dictionary; the narrator is astonished when he goes to retrieve his books to hear Funes

> [begin] by enumerating, in Latin and Spanish, the cases of prodigious memory cited in the *Historia Naturalis*: Cyrus, king of the Persians, who could call every soldier in his armies by name; Mithridates Eupator, who administered justice in the twenty-two languages of his empire . . . . (111)

However, the miraculous phenomenon that befalls Funes is double-edged. It is on one hand "a metaphor of universal insight and knowledge, one of mankind's oldest dreams" (Shaw 45), but here, is primarily a kind of nightmare, where Funes is lost in a "labyrinth without a minotaur"[1] (Borges, "Interview" 318), a world where no meaning can be found, where there is a quantity rather than an accretion of details. The narrator observes,

> Without effort, he [Funes] had learned English, French, Portuguese, Latin. I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes there were nothing but details . . . . (*Ficciones* 115)

And, "It was very difficult for him to sleep. To sleep is to be abstracted from the world . . . " (114–115). Here can be seen one of the paradoxes of memory: the ability to derive meaning from what is remembered cannot exist without sleep, or forgetting. It is often said that without memory we cannot know who we are (seen in extreme form in the case of amnesiacs) but it can also be said that without *forgetting* we cannot know who we are. In other words, without the ability to "forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract," we are only lost in the details, insomniac drifters in an endless labyrinth, in a maze without a minotaur.

Meaning in "Funes, the Memorious" is established through an exploration of lack of meaning. Keeping in mind Descartes's "central paradox of enlightened, humanist thought: the paradox that in the search for universal truths, we find there is nothing we can know finally and without doubt" (Walder 157), Borges's victory may be considered, as Shaw writes, "a triumph of art over the chaos of reality" (77). One key to this triumph lies in how the story is told: while Funes cannot escape the torments of his fantastic memory, in being able to tell this story, the narrator has himself vanquished the chaos of reality. The narrator is telling a story that Funes could never tell because in order to tell this story, the narrator has remembered some things and forgotten others.

At the same time, the reader is frequently reminded of the inevitable unreliability of the narrator's tale, as when, for example, the narrator says, "I remember (I believe) the strong delicate fingers of the plainsman [Funes] who can braid leather" (*Ficciones* 107). The narrator's recounting of his story evokes the story or stories *not* being told (that is, what the narrator has forgotten or omitted), as well as the meta-narrative, namely that there is no single "true story" to be told. However, in being able to "forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract," the narrator—and by extension, the reader—is lost not in Funes's labyrinth, but in Descartes's.

The fallibility of memory may here be seen as affirming, with forgetting not loss but rather, the creation of a generative space. In Funes's prodigious memory there is, as Walder says, "no margin between sign and signified, for signification to occur," where

> the kind of language needed by a memory incapable of forgetting would use up all the space, the internal space of consciousness, of thinking . . . . For thought, for language, to function, there has to be a partial forgetting, creating as it were an empty background for figuration. (156)

In a similar vein, Janet Coleman refers in her discussion of Pliny, the Roman naturalists, and "Funes, the Memorious" to the generative forgetting found in Borges's story as something considered "essential" by Plato, where meaning is arrived at "only by . . . leaving things out" (62).

While some critics do not go further in their interpretation of "Funes, the Memorious," the story can be read not only as a meditation on memory and forgetting, but also as a parody of modernist novels such as Joyce's *Ulysses* and

Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. The connection to Proust is especially noteworthy in that Borges displayed an "anxiety of influence" with regard to the French writer, worrying that he was overly influenced by him and desiring to "'destroy' . . . the father figure that he saw in Proust" (Craig 86). Unlike in *Recherche*, where memories are filled with meaning, Funes's memories may be seen as in fact displaying the opposite: after an enumeration of such feats of memory as seeing "all the shoots, clusters, and grapes of the vine" rather than "three wine glasses on the table," and the recollection of "the shapes of the clouds in the south at dawn on the 30th of April of 1882," Funes tells the narrator, "My memory, sir, is like a garbage disposal" (*Ficciones* 112). Craig writes that

> where Proust discovered the mystery of human consciousness, which he had inherited from writers of the late nineteenth century (e.g., Maurice Barrès) and which became incorporated into modernism, Borges found only a mere illusion of profundity. Thus, we can interpret the Argentine's mocking of Funes as the beginning of a postmodern response. (89)

Recounted—in keeping with its parodic nature—in an ironic tone with much exaggeration (as when, for example, Funes tells the narrator, "I have more memories in myself alone than all men have had since the world was a world" *Ficciones* 112), Funes's story is one where everything stays on the surface. Rather than his memory leading him to significant perceptions or revelations, it only gives rise to more memories; it is a kind of anti-syntagm, as it were, with disordered elements failing to cohere into a meaningful whole. As César Augusto Salgado writes,

> An emblem of futility, Funes's memory can be viewed as a symbol for the poetics of the modernist novel: his mind constitutes a never-ceasing novelistic machine, constantly generating an infinite stream-of-consciousness of recalled details and descriptions but never capable of "classifying all the memories of his childhood." (72)

It is not by chance that the accident that leaves Funes capable of recalling the "most trivial memories" (*Ficciones* 112) also immobilizes him. His paralysis brings to mind José Ortega y Gasset's criticism of *Recherche*, where Ortega says, "Proust has demonstrated the necessity of movement by writing a paralytic novel (307).[2] As Salgado observes, "Funes's paralysis recalls the ailments associated with the creativity of the modernist artist—Proust's asthma, Joyce's blindness—and satirically illustrates the technical achievement of the modernist novelist" (72). In the end—and not surprisingly—Funes dies "of a pulmonary congestion" (*Ficciones* 115), suggesting the death of the modernist novelist, who—drowning in detail—could no longer breathe.

Returning to the idea of "Funes, the Memorious" as a metaphor for insomnia, the story can also be considered a metaphor for a kind of extended figurative insomnia brought on by existential anxiety, by terror at the thought of a labyrinth without a minotaur. In this story, Borges not only attempts to stave off literal insomnia (and while he is at it, Proust), but also insomnia in its larger, metaphoric manifestations. It is Borges's achievement that at the same time he lays bare the impossibility of apprehending universal truth through either comprehensiveness or selectivity, he reaffirms the meaningfulness of intellectual inquiry, of enlightened, humanist thought. Shaw writes, "Every choice, whether in art or life, involves a sacrifice" (76); when we forget, or sacrifice, some things and remember others, we exercise our ability to think, finding meaning and affirming our humanity. Though Borges's work is often considered to lie somewhere between modernist and postmodernist—or to possess elements of both—in "Funes, the Memorious" he in fact propels us beyond this at times dead-end dichotomy, reminding us that we can hold paradox within, that it need not disillusion or destroy us, that the minotaur is indeed in the labyrinth.

Notes

1 Borges conceives of the minotaur as giving meaning to the labyrinth. In the interview with Dembo, he talks of a sonnet he wrote where "a man is supposed to be making his way through the dusty and stony corridors, and he hears a distant bellowing in the night. And then he makes out footprints in the sand and he knows that they belong to the minotaur, that the minotaur is after him, and, in a sense, he, too, is after the minotaur. The minotaur, of course, wants to devour him, and since his only aim in life is to go on wandering and wandering, he also longs for the moment" (318). He also tells of a second sonnet, where he "had a still more gruesome idea—the idea that there was no minotaur—that the man would go on endlessly wandering," lost in a "labyrinth without a minotaur. I mean, if anything is terrible, it is terrible because it is meaning-

less" (318).

2 Ortega speaks of dramatic action in a novel as action that "[makes] contemplation possible," contemplation that is not "a directly intended, primary act," but takes a secondary role "while the soul is moved by the dynamism of an interest" (307). Funes is unmoved by love, loss, or any of the other myriad dramas that motivate us, that lead us to, like the narrator, forget differences and forge narratives in the margins.

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