

# CHARACTER IN Po-Mo FICTION: BORGES



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**Carl Tighe**

When we are considering the process of creating a character in writing we have only three things to work with – what the character says, what the character does, and what other people say about them. Everything else – for example, their motivation or feelings - is the author's interpretation.

It may be that a 'character' is not a character at all in the conventional sense, but rather a single dominant attribute of character, a character trait, perhaps even a bizarre anomaly of personality, an aberration of humanity, that the author fixes on and which makes the 'character' one dimensional and barely human at all.

When we write, we might create an interesting description of a person and for the reader it might contribute something to an understanding of their role in the story. Or on the other hand, we might decide to leave a description out altogether. And even if we give a description it might not really help us understand a character. Also we can hint at what a character might be. Or we might try to construct a character by what they don't say or don't do. When it comes to depicting a character there are so many possibilities.

All things are possible and, as usual, as these things are moderated by genre, theme and form, by time, culture, fashion and the market, it is important to recognise there are no strict rules, only passing conventions. Indeed, so fluid is the Post-Modern literary world that sometimes we can blur the dividing lines between different kinds of writing and shade over from, say, a description into a narrative, into a poem, into an essay, into a history, into fantasy... all in the one piece. Whichever solution we choose the only real question is – does it work? Does it work now?

For many Jorge Louis Borges (1899-1986) is one of the most successful, entertaining and influential of the post-modern writers. He wrote on fantastic themes and his stories often depend on his ability to generate 'poetic faith' in the reader. He is often said to be *the* most influential 20<sup>th</sup> century writer, and he is often described as a marvelous stylist, a brilliant storyteller, a fabulist of rare distinction and an unparalleled treasure. Borges' entry on Wikipedia reads:

Jorge Francisco Isidoro Luis Borges (known as Jorge Luis Borges), born in Buenos Aires, was an Argentine short-story writer, essayist, poet and translator. His work embraces the 'character of unreality in all literature'. His most famous books are compilations of short stories interconnected by common themes such as dreams, labyrinths, libraries, mirrors, animals, fictional writers, philosophy, religion and God. In 1914 his family moved to Geneva in Switzerland, where he studied at the Collège de Genève. The family travelled widely in Europe, including stays in Spain. On his return to Argentina in 1921, Borges began publishing his poems and essays in surrealist literary journals. He also worked as a librarian and lecturer. In 1955 he was appointed director of the National Public Library and professor of Literature at the University of Buenos Aires. He became completely blind at the age of fifty five, and was unable to read from this point on. For reasons never fully explained, he did not learn braille. In 1961 he came to international attention when he received the first ever Prix International, sharing the award with Samuel Beckett. In 1971 he won the Jerusalem Prize. His work was translated and published widely in the United States and in Europe. Borges was fluent in several languages. Borges dedicated his final work, *The Conspirators*, to the city of Geneva, Switzerland.

In the area of character creation, and by way of example, we are going to look at Borges' description of the man, Funes, in one of Borges' most famous stories. It was first published in *La Nación* in June 1942, and then in the collection *Ficciones* (1944). There are two other English versions of this story: Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones*, (New York / London: Grove Press, 1962; Alfred A. Knopf / Everyman: 1993), pp. 83-91; and Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), pp. 87-95.



Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986)

## **FUNES, THE MEMORIOUS<sup>1</sup>**

by

Jorge Luis Borges

Translated by Anthony Kerrigan, additional notes by Carl Tighe

I remember him (I scarcely have the right to use this ghostly verb; only one man on earth deserved the right, and he is dead), I remember him with a dark passionflower in his hand, looking at it as no one has ever looked at such a flower, though they might look from the twilight of day until the twilight of night, for a whole life long. I remember him, his face immobile and Indian-like, and singularly remote, behind his cigarette. I remember (I believe) the strong delicate fingers of the plainsman who can braid leather. I remember, near those hands, a vessel in which to make maté tea<sup>2</sup>, bearing the arms

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<sup>1</sup> The title has also been translated as 'Funes, His Memory'. The original Spanish title was 'Funes el memorioso', where the Spanish word 'memorioso' means, 'having a vast memory'. So the title means something like 'Funes the memory', hinting that Funes is nothing but his memory, a living memory of everything he has experienced.

<sup>2</sup> Maté tea, also known as chimarrão or cimarrón, a traditional infused drink, common in Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile, Bolivia the southern states of Brazil. It is prepared by steeping dried leaves of yerba maté (*Ilex paraguariensis*) in hot water. Traditionally it is served in a hollowed calabash gourd and sucked through a straw, cane or metal tube.

of the Banda Oriental; I remember, in the window of the house, a yellow rush mat, and beyond, a vague marshy landscape.<sup>3</sup> I remember clearly his voice, the deliberate, resentful nasal voice of the old Eastern Shore man, without the Italianate syllables of today. I did not see him more than three times; the last time, in 1887...

That all those who knew him should write something about him seems to me a very felicitous idea; my testimony may perhaps be the briefest and without doubt the poorest, and it will not be the least impartial. The deplorable fact of my being an Argentinian will hinder me from falling into a dithyramb - an obligatory form in the Uruguay, when the theme is an Uruguayan.<sup>4</sup>

Littérateur, slicker, Buenos Airean: Funes did not use these insulting phrases, but I am sufficiently aware that for him I represented these unfortunate categories.<sup>5</sup> Pedro Leandro Ipuche<sup>6</sup> has written that Funes was a precursor of the superman, 'an untamed and vernacular Zarathustra';<sup>7</sup> I do not doubt it, but one must not forget, either, that he was a countryman from the town of Fray Bentos, with certain incurable limitations.<sup>8</sup>

My first recollection of Funes is quite clear: I see him at dusk, sometime in March or February of the year '84. That year, my father had taken me to spend the summer at Fray Bentos. I was on my way back from the farm at San Francisco with my cousin Bernardo Haedo. We came back singing, on horseback; and this last fact was not the only reason for my joy. After a sultry day, an enormous slate-grey-storm had obscured the sky. It was driven on by a wind from the south; the trees were already tossing like madmen; and I had the apprehension (the secret hope) that the elemental downpour would catch us out in the open. We were running a kind of race with the tempest. We rode into a narrow lane which wound down between two enormously high brick footpaths. It had grown black of a sudden; I now heard rapid almost secret steps above; I raised my eyes and saw a boy running along the narrow, cracked path as if he were

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<sup>3</sup> Banda Oriental: 'the eastern shore', the old name for the eastern shore of the River Uruguay / Plate River region; now the Orient Republic of Uruguay. People from the eastern side of the river are sometimes referred to as *orientales*, though many take this to be old fashioned and possibly also a racist slur.

<sup>4</sup> Dithyramb: a wild and exuberant song and dance announcing the birth of the Greek god Dionysus.

<sup>5</sup> *Littérateur*: A French noun, from the Latin word *litterator* (from *littera*, letter) meaning critic, lettered person, one who is devoted to the study or writing of literature, a professional writer of essays, books, stories or articles.

<sup>6</sup> *Pedro Leandro Ipuche* is a real figure, a friend of the young Borges, a novelist and magazine editor.

<sup>7</sup> Zarathustra: ancient Persian prophet, founder of Zoroastrianism, said to be the fount of lost knowledge and wisdom. In modern times thought to represent a kind of superman.

<sup>8</sup> Fray Bentos, meaning 'Friar Benedict': the name derived from a reclusive priest who was possibly the earliest inhabitant. It is a town and port on the Uruguay River. The town was originally called 'Villa Independencia'. In 1860 it became capital of the west Uruguay Department of Río Negro and was elevated to 'Ciudad' (city) in 1900. The name 'Fray Bentos' later became famous as a brand of corned beef, which was one of the main exports of the area. In 1980 Fray Bentos was still a rural backwater, with a population of 7,359; but by 2011 it had grown to a population of 24,406. The reasons for this growth are not clear.

running along a narrow, broken wall. I remember the loose trousers, tight at the bottom, the hemp sandals; I remember the cigarette in the hard visage, standing out against the by now limitless darkness. Bernardo unexpectedly yelled to him: 'What's the time, Ireneo?' Without looking up, without stopping, Ireneo replied: 'In four minutes it will be eight o'clock, child Bernardo Juan Francisco.' The voice was sharp, mocking.

I am so absentminded that the dialogue which I have just cited would not have penetrated my attention if it had not been repeated by my cousin, who was stimulated, I think, by a certain local pride and by a desire to show himself indifferent to the other's three-sided reply.

He told me that the boy above us in the pass was a certain Ireneo Funes, renowned for a number of eccentricities, such as that of having nothing to do with people and of always knowing the time, like a watch. He added that Ireneo was the son of Maria Clementina Funes, an ironing woman in the town, and that his father, some people said, was an 'Englishman' named O'Connor, a doctor in the salting fields, though some said the father was a horse-breaker, or scout, from the province of El Salto. Ireneo lived with his mother, at the edge of the country house of the Laurels.

In the years '85 and '86 we spent the summer in the city of Montevideo. We returned to Fray Bentos in '87. As was natural, I inquired after all my acquaintances, and finally, about 'the chronometer Funes.' I was told that he had been thrown by a wild horse at the San Francisco ranch, and that he had been hopelessly crippled. I remember the impression of uneasy magic which the news provoked in me: the only time I had seen him we were on horseback, coming from San Francisco, and he was in a high place; from the lips of my cousin Bernardo the affair sounded like a dream elaborated with elements out of the past. They told me that Ireneo did not move now from his cot, but remained with his eyes fixed on the backyard fig tree, or on a cobweb. At sunset he allowed himself to be brought to the window. He carried pride to the extreme of pretending that the blow which had befallen him was a good thing... Twice I saw him behind the iron grate which sternly delineated his eternal imprisonment: unmoving, once, his eyes closed; unmoving also, another time, absorbed in the contemplation of a sweet-smelling sprig of lavender cotton.

At the time I had begun, not without some ostentation, the methodical study of Latin. My valise contained the *De viris illustribus* of Lhomond, the *Thesaurus* of Quicherat, Caesar's *Commentaries*, and an odd-numbered volume of the *Historia Naturalis* of Pliny, which exceeded (and still exceeds) my modest talents as a Latinist. Everything is noised around in a small town; Ireneo, at his small farm on the outskirts, was not long in learning of the arrival of these anomalous books. He sent me a flowery, ceremonious letter, in which he recalled our encounter, unfortunately brief, 'on the seventh day of February of the year '84,' and alluded to the glorious services which Don Gregorio Haedo, my uncle, dead the same year, 'had rendered to the Two Fatherlands in the glorious campaign of Ituzaingó,' and he solicited the loan of any one of the volumes, to be accompanied by a dictionary 'for the better intelligence of the original text, for I do not know Latin as yet.' He promised to return them in good condition, almost immediately. The letter was perfect, very nicely constructed; the orthography was of the

type sponsored by Andrés Bello<sup>9</sup>: i for y, j for g. At first I naturally suspected a jest. My cousins assured me it was not so, that these were the ways of Ireneo. I did not know whether to attribute to impudence, ignorance, or stupidity the idea that the difficult Latin required no other instrument than a dictionary; in order fully to undeceive him I sent the *Gradus ad Parnassum* of Quicherat, and the Pliny.

On 14 February, I received a telegram from Buenos Aires telling me to return immediately, for my father was 'in no way well.' God forgive me, but the prestige of being the recipient of an urgent telegram, the desire to point out to all of Fray Bentos the contradiction between the negative form of the news and the positive adverb, the temptation to dramatize my sorrow as I feigned a virile stoicism, all no doubt distracted me from the possibility of anguish. As I packed my valise, I noticed that I was missing the *Gradus* and the volume of the *Historia Naturalis*. The 'Saturn' was to weigh anchor on the morning of the next day; that night, after supper, I made my way to the house of Funes. Outside, I was surprised to find the night no less oppressive than the day.

Ireneo's mother received me at the modest ranch.

She told me that Ireneo was in the back room and that I should not be disturbed to find him in the dark, for he knew how to pass the dead hours without lighting the candle. I crossed the cobblestone patio, the small corridor; I came to the second patio. A great vine covered everything, so that the darkness seemed complete. Of a sudden I heard the high-pitched, mocking voice of Ireneo. The voice spoke in Latin; the voice (which came out of the obscurity) was reading, with obvious delight, a treatise or prayer or incantation. The Roman syllables resounded in the earthen patio; my suspicion made them seem undecipherable, interminable; afterwards, in the enormous dialogue of that night, I learned that they made up the first paragraph of the twenty-fourth chapter of the seventh book of the *Historia Naturalis*. The subject of this chapter is memory; the last words are: 'Ujt nihil non iisdem verbis redderetur auditum'.<sup>10</sup>

Without the least change in his voice, Ireneo bade me come in. He was lying on the cot, smoking. It seems to me that I did not see his face until dawn; I seem to recall the momentary glow of the cigarette. The room smelled vaguely of dampness. I sat down, and repeated the story of the telegram and my father's illness.

I come now to the most difficult point in my narrative. For the entire story has no other point (the reader might as well know it by now) than this dialogue of almost a half-century ago. I shall not attempt to reproduce his words, now irrecoverable. I prefer truthfully to make a résumé of the many things Ireneo told me. The indirect style is remote and weak; I know that I sacrifice the effectiveness of my narrative; but let my readers imagine the nebulous sentences which clouded that night.

Ireneo began 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

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<sup>9</sup> Andrés de Jesús María y José Bello López (1781–1865) was a Venezuelan. He was the author of the first Spanish-American Grammar, *Gramática de la lengua castellana destinada al uso de los americanos*, (Grammar of the Castilian language intended for the use of the Americans), published in 1847. The word *Americanos* refers not to the 'Americans' of the USA but to Castilian or Spanish-speaking inhabitants of the Americas.

<sup>10</sup> Translation: 'So nothing that has been heard can be retold in the same words.'

soldier in his armies by name; Mithridates Eupator, who administered justice in the twenty-two languages of his empire; Simonides, inventory of mnemotechny; Metrodorus, who practised the art of repeating faithfully what he heard once.<sup>11</sup> With evident good faith Funes marvelled that such things should be considered marvellous. He told me that previous to the rainy afternoon when the blue-tinted horse threw him, he had been - like any Christian - blind, deaf-mute, somnambulistic, memoryless. (I tried to remind him of his precise perception of time, his memory for proper names; he paid no attention to me.) For nineteen years, he said, he had lived like a person in a dream: he looked without seeing, heard without hearing, forgot everything - almost everything. On falling from the horse, he lost consciousness; when he recovered it, the present was almost intolerable it was so rich and bright; the same was true of the most ancient and most trivial memories. A little later he realized that he was crippled. This fact scarcely interested him. He reasoned (or felt) that immobility was a minimum price to pay. And now, his perception and his memory were infallible.

We, in a glance, perceive three wine glasses on the table; Funes saw all the shoots, clusters, and grapes of the vine. He remembered the shapes of the clouds in the south at dawn on the 30th of April of 1882, and he could compare them in his recollection with the marbled grain in the design of a leather-bound book which he had seen only once, and with the lines in the spray which an oar raised in the Rio Negro on the eve of the battle of the Quebracho. These recollections were not simple; each visual image was linked to muscular sensations, thermal sensations, etc. He could reconstruct all his dreams, all his fancies. Two or three times he had reconstructed an entire day. He told me: I have more memories in myself alone than all men have had since the world was a world. And again: My dreams are like your vigils. And again, toward dawn: My memory, sir, is like a garbage disposal.

A circumference on a blackboard, a rectangular triangle, a rhomb, are forms which we can fully intuit; the same held true with Ireneo for the tempestuous mane of a stallion, a herd of cattle in a pass, the ever-changing flame or the innumerable ash, the many faces of a dead man during the course of a protracted wake. He could perceive I do not know how many stars in the sky.

These things he told me; neither then, nor at any time later, did they seem doubtful. In those days neither the cinema nor the phonograph yet existed; nevertheless, it seems strange, almost incredible, that no one should have experimented on Funes. The truth is that we all live by leaving behind; no doubt we all profoundly know that we are immortal and that sooner or later every man will do all things and know everything.

The voice of Funes, out of the darkness, continued. He told me that toward 1886 he had devised a new system of enumeration and that in a very few days he had gone before twenty-four thousand. He had not written it down, for what he once meditated would not be erased. The first stimulus to his work, I believe, had been his discontent with the fact that 'the thirty-three Uruguayans' required two symbols and three words,

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<sup>11</sup> Mnemotechny, mnemotechnic: the art of memory, theoretical and practical, or an artificial method of improving the memory, like mnemonics.

rather than a single word and a single symbol.<sup>12</sup> Later he applied his extravagant principle to the other numbers. In place of seven thousand thirteen, he would say (for example) *Máximo Perez*; in place of seven thousand fourteen, *The Train*; other numbers were *Luis Melián Lafinur*, *Olimar*, *Brimstone*, *Clubs*, *The Whale*, *Gas*, *The Cauldron*, *Napoleon*, *Agustín de Vedia*. In lieu of five hundred, he would say *nine*. Each word had a particular sign, a species of mark; the last were very complicated. . . . I attempted to explain that this rhapsody of unconnected terms was precisely the contrary of a system of enumeration. I said that to say three hundred and sixty-five was to say three hundreds, six tens, five units: an analysis which does not exist in such numbers as *The Negro Timoteo* or *The Flesh Blanket*. Funes did not understand me, or did not wish to understand me.

Locke, in the seventeenth century, postulated (and rejected) an impossible idiom in which each individual object, each stone, each bird and branch had an individual name;<sup>13</sup> Funes had once projected an analogous idiom, but he had renounced it as being too general, too ambiguous. In effect, Funes not only remembered every leaf on every tree of every wood, but even every one of the times he had perceived or imagined it. He determined to reduce all of his past experience to some seventy thousand recollections, which he would later define numerically. Two considerations dissuaded him: the thought that the task was interminable and the thought that it was useless. He knew that at the hour of his death he would scarcely have finished classifying even all the memories of his childhood.

The two projects I have indicated (an infinite vocabulary for the natural series of numbers, and a usable mental catalogue of all the images of memory) are lacking in sense, but they reveal a certain stammering greatness. They allow us to make out dimly, or to infer, the dizzying world of Funes. He was, let us not forget, almost incapable of general, platonic ideas. It was not only difficult for him to understand that the generic term *dog* embraced so many unlike specimens of differing sizes and different forms; he was disturbed by the fact that a dog at three-fourteen (seen in profile) should have the same name as the dog at three-fifteen (seen from the front). His own face in the mirror, his own hands, surprised him on every occasion. Swift writes that the emperor of Lilliput could discern the movement of the minute hand; 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. *Babylon*, *London*, and *New York* have overawed the imagination of men with their ferocious splendour; no one, in those populous towers or upon those surging avenues, has felt the heat and pressure of a reality as indefatigable as that which day and night converged upon the unfortunate *Ireneo* in his humble South American farmhouse. It was very difficult for him to sleep. To sleep is to be abstracted from the world; Funes, on

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<sup>12</sup> The 'Thirty Three' were a group of patriotic soldiers who in 1825 crossed the River Plate from Buenos Aires in order to help liberate Uruguay from Spanish and Portuguese colonial rule. Uruguay became an independent state in 1830.

<sup>13</sup> John Locke (1632–1704), an English philosopher and social activist mainly concerned with governance, political theory, epistemology and religious tolerance.



his back in his cot, in the shadows, imagined every crevice and every moulding of the various houses which surrounded him. (I repeat, the least important of his recollections was more minutely precise and more lively than our perception of a physical pleasure or a physical torment.) Toward the east, in a section which was not yet cut into blocks of homes, there were some new unknown houses. Funes imagined them black, compact, made of a single obscurity; he would turn his face in this direction in order to sleep. He would also imagine himself at the bottom of the river, being rocked and annihilated by the current.

Without effort, he 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, almost contiguous details.

The equivocal clarity of dawn penetrated along the earthen patio.

Then it was that I saw the face of the voice which had spoken all through the night. Ireneo was nineteen years old; he had been born in 1868; he seemed as monumental as bronze, more ancient than Egypt, anterior to the prophecies and the pyramids. It occurred to me that each one of my words (each one of my gestures) would live on in his implacable memory; I was benumbed by the fear of multiplying superfluous gestures.

Ireneo Funes died in 1889, of a pulmonary congestion.

### Follow-Up Work

- What character writing processes do you think are at work here?
- Is this a story, a poem, a memoir or an essay?
- Does the fact that it is a story, a poem, a memoir or an essay alter the character writing processes at work? If so, in what way?
- Whatever this is - a poem, a memoir or an essay - do you believe it?
- In what ways is this story (if it is a story) tricky?
- How and in what ways does the process of the language work to:
  - (a) create a character
  - (b) convey a story with a message?
  - (c) obscure any message the story might have?
- Is there a message?
- What do you think the message might be?
- Could you understand this story without the help of the footnotes?
- In what sense is this the work of a 'Littérateur' (paragraph 3), and is this important?
- What does the narrator tell us about Funes?
- What does Funes do that informs us of his personality?
- What does Funes say that helps us form an opinion about his character?
- Is it possible that in an ironic Post-Modern way Borges is offering us a parody of character rather than an actual character?

- Is it the character of Funes that is revealed here, or is it that of the narrator?
- Borges claimed this story was 'one long metaphor for insomnia'. What do you suppose he meant? Do you think that is true?
- Did you find this story hard work?
- If so, why?
- In what way can you make use of Borges' techniques and processes in building and showing a character in your work?
- In what way do you think this work relates to the idea of 'writing processes'?