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Funes, Digitized: Borges as a Guide to Fractured Digital Identities

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Thanks to the near constant writing and publishing of scattered thoughts online, our culture is becoming incapable of forgetting. Now fully ensconced in the digital era, a reexamination of memory and identity is required. What you say is permanent. This fragments identity, rather than solidifying it. Despite his death in 1986, Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges is able to shed light on the restructuring of identity that comes about through writing and the permanence of memory writing engenders. Borges's literary works regularly call into crisis our collective understandings of these topics. Through a reading of his short stories "Borges and I" and "Funes, His Memory," I will discuss how identity formation operates in a contemporary context, and the ethical implications of these changes.

### Writing and Selfhood

Borges laments the written duplication of his identity in the story "Borges and I," in which, he writes in the first person about "the other man." "The other man" is Borges the writer. The story opens with a confession, "It's Borges, the other one, that things happen to."<sup>1</sup> The wording the narrator uses in describing the other man makes two things clear. First, he and the Borges known throughout the literary universe are two separate people. Second, "the other man" has his presence bestowed upon him by others. He cannot talk about Borges the writer's actual existence. The other man doesn't really live. He exists in the external, social world as a product of conversations about him. The narrating Borges tells us that he receives news of his counterpart by mail, while he worries that his own life is becoming more and more "mechanical." He still walks through Buenos Aires, pausing to admire the architecture, but his literary counterpart's presence slowly drains his life of its vibrant nature.<sup>2</sup> Due to the narrator's alienation from the writer, he feels removed from his social life and his lack of social presence creates the sense that he is no longer fully human. The personality that he once claimed as his own has been estranged from him because others now associate him with the literary Frankenstein he has brought into being.

Writing has significantly impacted the ways in which selfhood is conceived. In *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong argues that writing is the tool which makes the dichotomy between a subject's sense of interiority and exteriority possible. Ong claims that the move from oral culture to literate culture changes our locus of knowledge from sound to vision and this movement makes interior selfhood possible. This is because sound, Ong argues, is a unifying sense that allows us to be more fully immersed in the world, while vision dissects the world, dividing it into objects of perception and separating them from the perceiving subject.<sup>3</sup> Ong talks about vision as that which demands distinctness (and thus, separation), but makes it clear that auditory phenomena are of great importance even for the subjects of a literate culture. "Knowledge," he writes, "is ultimately not a fractioning but a unifying phenomenon, a striving for harmony. Without harmony, an interior condition, the psyche is in bad health."<sup>4</sup> Even in cultures dominated by writing, sound's invasion of interiority helps create a

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<sup>1</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. "Borges and I." *The Aleph and Other Stories*, 177.

<sup>2</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. "Borges and I." *The Aleph and Other Stories*, 177.

<sup>3</sup> Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy*, 71.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 71-72.

harmony of self. Often, this need can be attended to by direct conversations with others, bringing their spoken words into the interior consciousness of the literate person. Through interactions with others, we are expected to tie our disparate senses of self into something more cohesive. The relationships which help us define ourselves, also help us find unity in our lives. When Borges writes a second Borges into existence, there is no amount of conversation which can fully harmonize the two. The distinction between them is only found on paper. The narrator and his written self have a symbiotic relationship, through which both can develop identities, but their separation cannot be reconciled in conversation. Borges, the writer is an exclusively visual figure.

This is only further complicated as others, in conversation with the flesh and blood Borges (who must be considered separate from the Borges who narrates “Borges and I,” since once it is written, that voice belongs to the writer, too), fail to treat the two as separate. For them, there is no conflict between what Borges writes and who Borges is. As more and more of our interactions are written rather than spoken, and we speak our identities less than we write them, reconciliation of these selves becomes a serious challenge. Externalized actions belong to a part of the self which cannot be retrieved by the subject.

### Identity and Memory

For Ong, when non-literate cultures think of the self, they think of an entity totally bound up in its surroundings. Questions of identity are best answered by other people. Only other people should care about whether or not you are a good person—if you aren't, it affects them most directly. In *Orality and Literacy*, Ong demonstrates this self/world collapse through a discussion of A.R. Luria's interviews with illiterate workers in the Soviet Union. When asked about themselves, the interviewees primarily focused on their status in the world—how much wheat they were growing, whether they were married or had children, etc—their character held little interest. “What can I say about my own heart? How can I talk about my character?” one of the men interviewed asked Luria.<sup>5</sup> The written word shows subjects themselves for the first time, turning the self into an object for exploration. When memory is put to paper, the subject cannot think of the world solely as a unity of perceptions and phenomenal experience, because the self is made distinct from the world. The subject is allowed to read its own memories and *see* the self as another for the first time. Paul Ricoeur analyzes this phenomenon in depth in his aptly titled treatise on identity, *Oneself as Another*.

Ricoeur talks about identity creation in terms of arranging and rearranging memories into stories. I learn who I am by turning myself into the protagonist in my life's novel. Given Ong's understanding of identity, Ricoeur's reliance on literature makes perfect sense. People have access to literature, which itself grants access to the inner-most thoughts of a narrator who arranges events into a story for others. It is no coincidence that Ricoeur refers to the process of creating an identity through narrative as “emplotment.” This is similar to how oral story telling functioned, but with the added benefit of being able to tell more and more complex stories with a huge number of original narrators as examples. Literary narrators

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<sup>5</sup> Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy*, 54.

provide an intensely personal in-depth model for understanding the self. Novels present these narratives visually. The written word creates the conditions under which the literary form can shape the way in which one thinks of the self.

Furthermore, due to the permanence of the published written word, the plots formed by narrators seem to be static. Once we are able to identify certain patterns and make relevant aesthetic judgments, it begins to appear as though a well-written story could not have unfolded in any other way. The same holds true when one thinks of his or her own life:

The paradox of emplotment is that it inverts the effect of contingency, in the sense of that which could have happened differently or which might not have happened at all, by incorporating it in some way to into the effect of necessity or probability exerted by the configuring act. The inversion of the effect of contingency into an effect of necessity is produced at the very core of the event ... It only becomes an integral part of the story when understood after the fact, once it is transfigured by the so-to-speak retrograde necessity which provides from the temporal totality carried to its term.<sup>6</sup>

When put this way, emplotment sounds more like entrapment, snaring the events of a narrative into a plot which could have only unfolded as it did. Despite our ability to see randomness and contingency in many aspects of our lives, for Ricoeur, the moments which define one's character for oneself possess a clear fatalism. These notions can change over time, but in the moment of remembering, narrative necessity is dominant.

Ricoeur is not thinking of writers when formulating his thoughts on identity. He has the reader in mind—the person who learns from novels and uses those structures to assemble an identity. The feeling of narrative necessity described above shifts along with one's changing own sense of identity in time. This is complicated by the act of writing, and further complicated by the *publication* of those writings. Ricoeur believes that his project helps the subject understand the changes in his or her identity over time, but thanks to our personal memory's selectivity, we rarely are forced to confront the changes in our self-understanding over time in a visceral manner. That is, until we write them down and are allowed to stare at thoughts that can seem so absurd years after their escape from the mind to publication. Borges's difficulties with written fragmentation are beyond the scope of Ricoeur's project. Yet, given the amount of writing being done in the digital sphere, it is time to take Borges's concerns about identity more seriously.

## **Internet Selves**

The number of written selves is growing daily. Borges's writerly problem, paralyzed by the identity schism he has produced, is a reality for more people than ever. No longer is it just the Borgeses of the world who feel this disconnect between their written selves and the sort of identity Ricoeur describes. The massive variety of social networking platforms—from

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<sup>6</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*, 142.

Facebook to Twitter to blogs—only compounds Borges's problems for many of today's life writers. Each of those platforms serves at least a slightly different purpose for their users. A contemporary Borges might have to think of not only Borges the literary writer, but Borges the Facebook user, Borges the blogger, and so on and so forth.

Today's internet-bound selves do not enter into these modes of identity creation against their wills, and Borges didn't write books because he wanted to feel like two (or more) different people. When describing Borges's writing, Borges's narrator declares, “that literature is my justification.”<sup>7</sup> Likely, before he became a writer, Borges would have dreamed of becoming one. That literature is his justification, because it is the culmination of a story of identity started long ago. To quote Ricoeur: “Identification with heroic figures clearly displays this otherness assumed as one's own, but this is already latent in the identification of values which make us place a “cause” above our own survival. An element of loyalty is thus incorporated into character and makes it turn toward fidelity, hence toward maintaining the self.”<sup>8</sup> In writing, this maintenance often results in an unexpected fracturing. Borges feels it when he says “I recognize myself less in [Borges's] books than in many others, or in the tedious strumming of a guitar.”<sup>9</sup> He goes so far as to say that Borges's writing no longer even belongs to him, but now must be placed in the realm of language itself, or to the literary tradition which now claims it. His loyalty and fidelity to himself splinters off into a difficult, alienating loyalty to Borges the writer, dooming him “utterly and inevitably to oblivion.”<sup>10</sup>

This, on the surface, does not seem to be radically different from the various personae one must create at work, with family, and with friends, but those masks are left in their settings and need not follow the wearer around the immortalizing internet. In our everyday lives, we are allowed to forget the personae that fracture our identities and create a sense of wholeness in each moment of narration. Through the joint processes of remembering and forgetting, the subject creates an unstable unity within the present moment. Writing, on the other hand, makes an object of memory and denies us the ability to completely disregard past thoughts and actions.

When one goes back and re-reads previous narratives of self, their memories are made present in an often jarring way. People typically have a vague understanding of what they thought about themselves and the world at the age of sixteen, but they need not be visually confronted by those thoughts unless they are put to writing and published. The process of narrating identity turns our more regrettable youthful narratives into footnotes to be incorporated into the newer, supposedly better narratives of self formed in the present. When one is able to actually see these thoughts online, they are not easily reincorporated into a self. This happens as a result of vision's demand for distinctions, but the issues run deeper.

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<sup>7</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. “Borges and I.” *The Aleph and Other Stories*, 177.

<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*, 121.

<sup>9</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. “Borges and I.” *The Aleph and Other Stories*, 177.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

In the case of online writing, these attempts at forming an identity are visible to large numbers of people and lack the intimacy of remembering. Anyone with access to these micro-publications can interpret them in any number of ways, thus separating these thoughts from our ability to recollect them as exclusively our own. Their public nature makes them a part of public, not personal, memory. Much like Borges's work, each Twitter post enters the digital sphere and becomes a part of the broader internet tradition. Whether I like it or not, my Facebook page belongs to a digital culture more than it belongs to me. The words on the screen are separated from me the instant they are published. At least Borges's contribution to the literary tradition was groundbreaking; most people writing their identities in the digital sphere are detached from a banal online presence that becomes permanently associated with your name, if not your sense of self.

### **Perfect Memory**

In another of Borges's short stories, "Funes, His Memory," we see what happens when memory becomes perfect. While the link to internet culture here seems a bit tenuous—not least because Funes's perfect memory is necessarily coupled with perfect perception—the apparent permanence of all externalized memories has a weaker but comparable effect. Unlike blog posts, which place the writer's thoughts outside of himself or herself, Funes's memory does not require externalization. However, our only access to Funes's memory is through writing, and the narrator routinely uses external allusions to describe Funes's memory. The narrator writes Funes's story as a part of an anthology of scientific essays on Funes,<sup>11</sup> bringing his memory thoroughly into a space meant to be reserved for objectivity.

The narrator expresses confusion that experiments were not done on Funes, despite the fact that no cinematographers existed during Funes's life and the phonograph had yet to be invented.<sup>12</sup> The narrator offers no explanation of why those particular items would have needed to be invented to make scientific research on Funes a possibility, but still cannot resist making the comparison to these technological memory aids. Mediation is necessary because Funes's subjectivity is incomprehensible to those of us with imperfect memories. For the narrator, to think about Funes is to think in simile and metaphor, relating him to the objects that were designed to capture the world in ways that are not otherwise possible for human subjects. He is the embodiment of the technological advances yet to come. The absolute completeness of Funes's memory makes the idea of narratives of identity absurd. He doesn't need shortcuts to figure out who he is; he is the totality of his experiences which are always available to him.

While Funes saw a world so rich, clear, and distinct that it was "unbearably precise,"<sup>13</sup> he possessed an "extraordinary remoteness"<sup>14</sup> toward others. For Funes, the world appeared with such exquisite detail that he often sat in his room with the lights out in an effort to dull his perceptions. Any exposure to detail that would occupy his mind in the present would

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<sup>11</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. "Funes, His Memory." *Fictions*, 91.

<sup>12</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. "Funes, His Memory." *Fictions*, 97.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 98.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

also leave each and every speck of perception permanently lodged in his brain. He has too many specifics constantly at his disposal. Darkening his room was the closest thing he could get to forgetting, abstracting, and generalizing.

At one point, Funes becomes frustrated with how many words are required to express certain numbers, making some numeric phrases inefficient. He tries to make a new system of numbers for himself, but his way of assigning names to numbers could scarcely be considered a system at all. He gives new names to each number to eliminate the need for multiple digits. When the narrator attempts to explain to him that this is not a systematic way of doing things, Funes does not understand or care—he has no need for systems because the totality of his existence is constantly at his fingertips.<sup>15</sup> Each moment is so vivid and distinct that everything requires a unique name to describe it. The perpetual specificity of his world makes it impossible to imagine Funes narrating his own existence, or *treating others as anything more than incredibly specific objects of perception*. His ability to recall every last detail of his experience makes for an impenetrably different experience from our own. To quote the narrator, “I have no idea how many stars he saw in the sky.”<sup>16</sup>

### The Death of Creativity

Here we can form the link to the digital realm more clearly. The internet acts as an immediate access point for a huge volume of thoughts, the vast majority of which subjects cannot legitimately claim as one's own. Though people may claim to have thought up the ideas they stole from a website, this false ownership is of a different type than the (also potentially false) sense of ownership which comes with an active narrative structuring of thought and identity. While one's sense of identity may be a mere fictional construct, creating that identity and holding it as one's own is an integral part of the human experience in a literate culture. Our need to narrate through creative remembering and forgetting allows for the opportunity to say “this is me.”

Funes does not require creativity, because his memory renders it unnecessary. He learns Latin, English, French and Portuguese from dictionaries, but cannot understand why each has only a single word for various perceptions. He uses his experiences of dogs as an example. Every particular iteration of a dog that he has ever seen immediately accessible for Funes, so is every angle that those dogs were seen from, and they all seemed like different animals.<sup>17</sup> At the end of the story, the narrator realizes exactly what that means for his own interactions with Funes. “I was struck by the thought that every word I spoke, every expression of my face or motion of my hand would endure in his implacable memory,” the narrator writes, “I was rendered clumsy by the fear of making pointless gestures,” and then, suddenly, the plot comes to a halt with a final terse statement, “Ireneo Funes died in 1889 of pulmonary congestion.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. “Funes, His Memory.” *Fictions*, 97.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 96.

<sup>17</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. “Funes, His Memory.” *Fictions*, 98-99.

<sup>18</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. “Funes, His Memory.” *Fictions*, 99.

In shifting abruptly from his apprehension about being lodged firmly in Funes's memory to Funes's death, the narrator expresses the terror that comes from thorough objectification. Not just any objectification, but *objectification which one does not control*. As stated above, narrating and writing the self are acts of self-objectification, but both are explicitly for our own benefit. Be it for the sake of understanding ourselves or simply trying to appear more important in social interactions, self-objectification takes up a large portion of our time and mental energy. In each of those cases, we are aware that we are the ones expending that time and energy. When it becomes clear that *someone else* is doing the exact same thing to us, the objectification is petrifying. We become aware that we have little control over the identity which is typically thought of as our own.

This consequence is rarely considered when the subject first attempts to write the self. In fact, the desire to externalize the self is often a primary motivating factor for starting to write. A constantly growing portion of the population uses the internet as a tool to write their own identities, either implicitly or explicitly. However, the looming threat that one will realize the distance between their personal and public selves is always present. Digital objects possess both an extreme remoteness and an incredible precision that hides and sharpens this threat. Our ability to immerse ourselves in that which is so physically removed from us makes intensely particular objects of everything, replacing much of the narrative process involved with one's own being with something more like a chain of impulses and perceptions. Just as it does for Funes.

However, it is necessary to point out that Funes's perfect perception eliminates any need for him to narrate his own identity, while contemporary culture still demands this narration. The closest Funes comes to personal narration is when he attempts to catalog his past experiences, with each of his days reduced to seventy thousand experiences which he would define by numbers.<sup>19</sup> The perfection of his memory is both the condition of possibility for starting the project and the condition of impossibility for its completion. Every last one of his memories is “more detailed, more vivid than our own perception of a physical pleasure or physical torment.”<sup>20</sup> Each moment is so clear and intense that it is impossible to evaluate which of them might be more important than the rest.

The technological mediation of the internet allows us our own (significantly dulled) version of this as we travel to places we never thought we'd go and experience things digitally that our social standing, physical bodies, or morally coded psyches might not allow in a non-digital space. Further, we make ourselves accessible on a grand scale. When we explore digital space, we are encouraged to share our findings for the world to read. Friends and strangers alike can read and critique our thoughts on these previously impossible discoveries. The varied perceptions that the internet allows us to experience all come through the eyes of others who act as our guides and judges.

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<sup>19</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. “Funes, His Memory.” *Fictions*, 98.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 99.

Ricoeur sees the alienation of the written self clearly. “Just where the work is separated off from the author, its entire being is gathered up in the signification that the other grants to it.”<sup>21</sup> These externalized selves become works, rather than identities, despite the fact that their authors are very likely to identify them as an expression of selfhood. Each incarnation of digital identity that one comes across online remains nearly immediately accessible at all times to anyone with an internet connection, giving them the right to grant being to our written selves. As one grows and ages, the gap between personal narrative identity and public written identity widens. I become estranged from the thoughts I once had, despite their perpetual availability to me and to others.

This is not a problem unique to any one person. The written selves of others are also always potentially present. I see the past of other people as present when I read their old tweets. There is voyeuristic pleasure in making another person present in this reduced state. These thoughts are offered up for interpretation, not of the ideas expressed, but of the person who has expressed them. Instead of encountering others, the constant representation of selfhood by all parties causes me to encounter already objectified characters with whom I interact in impersonal public forums. We become the masters of the identities of others. The written selves that we bring into being remain distinct from the person who wrote them, but the link between these selves remains. If the written self is treated as a work of art, then their original authors are as well.

The problem here is in the objectification found in memory, or more accurately, in a lack of forgetting. As more and more of our identities are found exclusively online, we must understand that to forget in the digital sphere is impossible. Being forgotten online is simply to have the self fall into oblivion.<sup>22</sup> Our written selves can only be fully forgotten when they do not exist or allow for the past to perpetually exist as an un-lived object for examination. When our narrator in “Funes, His Memory” realizes his status as an atemporal object for Funes, he ceases to narrate, allowing that period of time and his presence in it to be forgotten. He chooses oblivion over objectification, but only does so after coming to understand his status as object to Funes. *His refusal to write is a refusal to allow the power that Funes had over his identity to be passed along to his future readers.*

### **The Need to Forget**

Forgetting can be embraced. A rethinking of the forgotten oblivion in terms of the unthought, the unthinkable, the radically other is required. When our narrator in “Borges and I” tells us that “My life is a point-counterpoint, a kind of fugue, and a falling away—and everything winds up being lost to me, and everything falls into oblivion, or into the hands of the other man,”<sup>23</sup> we cannot read this statement as a declaration of the collapse into non-existence of the narrator or the objects of his perception. We must think of the narrator's life not in biological terms, but in narrative terms. The forgetting and oblivion found in Borges's

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<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*, 156.

<sup>22</sup> In Borges's native Spanish, as well as most Romance languages, the words for forgetting and oblivion are etymologically linked.

<sup>23</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. “Borges and I.” *The Aleph and Other Stories*, 178.

work must be looked at as the falling away of self-knowledge to become a sort of social nullity. When our narrator's unwritten identity veers toward the void, he maintains his ontological status. Forgetting and oblivion must be linked to the phenomenal appearance of non-objectivity, the alterity that escapes all narratives, but is always hinted at beneath the *logos* which makes each story possible.

By pushing more of the processes of identity creation into the permanent, digital realm, we are presented with the opportunity to step away and live in a world that routinely forgets who we are and allows us to forget our objectifications of others. The people who are seen as social objects in our everyday lives can simply be seen as wholly other, outside of my world, non-objects. Those people do not matter to my written self, and can thus be seen outside of the constraints of social expectations. For this to be possible, we must learn to disentangle our written selves from our narrative selves, and to allow for others to do the same. Allowing the personal, Ricoeurian sense of self to plunge into obscurity in the moments when I choose not to read or write presents us with the opportunity to eschew selfish action in non-digital spaces. There is less reason than ever for me to present an idealized version of myself in face-to-face interactions with others. This certainly could result in a devolution of moral thought and action in traditional social spaces. In particular, dulling our sense of shame could result in a great deal of honest, unburdened, awful interactions with others in non-digital spaces.

Our sense of respect for the very existence of others would need to be strengthened in order to combat the de-emphasizing of personal identity-based mechanisms for cultivating ethics in a newly digital world. This would require a rethinking of ethical development, one that our culture may be unprepared to undertake at this moment. However, that danger is accompanied by the possibility to accept others as they come to us, rather than project social expectations on to them. The moments in which I break fidelity to my narrative sense of self are the moments in which I am most free to respond to others as they are, not how I believe I ought to respond to them to be in a particular social context.

Instead of battling against the permanence of objectification in the digital world, we can turn into the spin. The digital world can be where identity is petrified in writing, while selfhood is forgotten elsewhere. When our sense of self is permanently present online, taking leave of that rigid structuring of self is more necessary than ever. It is impossible to maintain a fidelity to written selfhood, simply because the way we see ourselves is so easily altered in day-to-day experience. Those day-to-day experiences, hidden away from the public projection of identity, can form the basis of a personal, narrative identity to which we owe no fidelity. A more auditory mode of being in these situations can create a more harmonious existence with others that denies the need for the interiority created by writing, all while holding on to the social gains won by the written word. Therefore, away from my selves written through technological mediation, I am free to find relationships beyond social abstraction. I can find myself in a physical space designated for forgetting. For encountering others not as objects, but as others.

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