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Unidad 8, Un Paso más

Jorge Luis Borges: “El espejo de tinta” y la tecnología

Infinity according to Jorge Luis Borges - Ilan Stavans

00:09

When Ireneo Funes looked at a glass of wine on a table , he saw “all the shoots, clusters, and grapes of the vine . He remembered the shapes of the clouds in the south at the dawn of the 30th of April of 1882, and he could compare them in his recollection with a marbled grain in the design of leather-bound book which he had seen only once, and the lines in the spray which an oar raised in the Rio Negro on the eve of the battle of the Quebracho.” In the short story “Funes, the Memories”, Jorge Luis Borges explores what it would be like to have a perfect memory. His character not only remembers everything he has ever seen, but every time has had seen it in perfect detail. These details are so overwhelming, Funes has to spend his days in a dark room and can only sleep by imagining a part of town he has never visited. According to Borges, Funes’ memories even rendered him incapable of real thought, because “to think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract.” In the overly replete world of Funes, there were nothing but details. Funes’ limitless memory was just one of Borges many exploration of infinity.

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Born in Argentina in 1899, he admired the revolutionaries of his mothers family, but took after his father’s bookish clan. His body of essays, poems, and stories, or as he called them, ficciones, pioneered the literary style of “Lo real maravilloso”, known in English as Magical Realism— and each was just a few pages long. Though Borges was not interested in writing long books, he was an avid reader, recruiting friends to read to him after he went blind in middle age. He said his image of paradise was an infinite library, an idea he brought to life in “The Library of Babel.” Built out of countless identical rooms, each containing the same number of books of the same length, the library of babel is its own universe. It contains every possible variation of text, so there are some profound books, but also countless tomes of complete gibberish. The narrator has spent his entire life wandering this vast labyrinth of information in a possibly futile search for meaning.

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Labyrinths appeared over and over in Borges’ work. In the “Garden of Forking Path” as Yu Tsun winds his way through country roads, he remembers a lost labyrinth built by one of his ancestors. Over the course of the story, he finds out the labyrinth is not a physical maze but a novel. And this novel reveals that real Garden of Forking Paths is time; in every instant, there are infinite possible courses of action. And as one moment follows another, each possibility begets another set of divergent futures.

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Borges laid one infinite expanses in his labyrinths, but he also explored the ideas of condensing all of time into a single moment. In “The God’s Script”, at the very beginning of the world, the god writes exactly one message into the spots of the jaguars, who then “love and reproduce without end, in caverns, in cane fields, on islands, in order that the last men might receive it.” The last man turns out to be a tenacious, old priest who spends years memorizing and deciphering the jaguars’ spots, culminating in an epiphany where he finally understands the god’s message. Imprisoned deep underground, he has no one to share this meaning with and it changes nothing about his circumstances, but he doesn’t mind: in that one moment, he has experienced all the experience of everyone who has ever existed.

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Reading Borges, you might catch a glimpse of infinity too.

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