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The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2012
224 pp., illus. 34 b&w. Trade, \$24.95/£17.95
ISBN: 9780262018210.*Reviewed by Jan Baetens*

Contrary to what its title may suggest, this book is less an analysis of Borges's literary treatment of how our memory works than a presentation of historical and cutting-edge research on the same subject. Borges, in other words, is not the subject of the study, but its most important rhetorical channel. It may come as a surprise that the Argentina born and educated neuroscientist Rodrigo Quian Quiroga did not know about "Funes the Memorious" and other famous stories by Borges when he had started working on the functioning of the human brain (the author does not focus on the distinction between mind and brain, just as he does not stick to the difference between body and soul), but it makes his personal account only more vivid and intriguing. For after all, Borges's tales, much of them from the 1940s, give as vivid a description of human memory as today's most sophisticated visual theories and representations, even if they do it in a way that modern scientists may label as definitely non-scholarly.

Borges, however, had perfectly understood the essence of memory, which has of course to do with storage and retrieval but also, and perhaps even more importantly, with forgetting, filtering, selecting, on the one hand, and abstraction, generalization, categorization, on the other hand. Memory can only function as we want it to do, if we are capable of leaving many things aside, while relying at the same time on the possibility to label, classify, pigeonhole what we retain, in the various times, layers, and types of memory that contemporary brain science helps differentiate. Just as Borges tells his readers about memory by describing the strange case of Funes, a man who remembered literally everything he had ever experienced but proved unable of "thought", i.e. of creative thinking, Quiroga presents his overview of neuroscience by highlighting a wide range of illnesses, disorders, and freak stories that all insist upon the same message: the vital necessity of forgetting as well as that of generalizing, and the horrible consequences on the human mind and human behavior if these faculties that the man in the street may not spontaneously associate with "good memory."

Quiroga's book may not contain much new information on how neuroscientists study and represent memory nowadays, but the way in which he does is it refreshing and accessible to a very broad audience. The structure of the book is mainly chronological (it follows more or less the findings in the field since the early 19th Century), but with many fascinating digressions to theoretical and philosophical issues that provides excellent new readings of some great authors like William James, Gustav Spiller, John Stuart Mill. Quiroga is a superb storyteller, who has the intelligence to make himself invisible behind the subject that he is narrating. He generously foregrounds the seminal thinking of all those, in Western as well as in non-Western traditions, who

preceded him in the field and proves very sensitive to the unfathomable suffering that goes along with neurological dysfunctions. Moreover, he manages to establish a real dialogue with his reader, not only by seducing him or her with the rhetoric and humor of his fables and anecdotes, but also with a great sense of timing and construction. Each chapter discloses a new dimension of a universe which never becomes a labyrinth of concepts and research hypotheses and throughout the book the reader is invited to "play" with the author, who is a master in combining verbal and visual information and who helps the reader make a wonderful journey through the human mind.

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Contact LDR: ldr@leonardo.infoContact Leonardo: isast@leonardo.info

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