Representations of Remembrance: Literature and Memory in Borges, Pigila, and Fresán

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ABSTRACT

Representations of Remembrance: Literature and Memory in Borges, Piglia, and Fresán

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This study examines three works by Argentine authors of the late 20th and early 21st centuries: Jorge Luis Borges’s “La memoria de Shakespeare,” Ricardo Piglia’s La ciudad ausente, and Rodrigo Fresán’s Mantra. These works explore the theme of memory directly, and provide insight into the role of memory in relation to literature, technology, and media. To understand memory and its functions and failures, I employ concepts from recent scientific inquiry into the nature of memory, particularly neuroscience and clinical psychology. Within this framework, I show how memory and narrative fiction share a number of similarities, and explore the idea of memoria ajena, or memories that come not from personal experience, but from outside, whether it be from another person’s mind or from the fiction one consumes.

Keywords: Jorge Luis Borges, “La memoria de Shakespeare,” Ricardo Piglia, La ciudad ausente, Rodrigo Fresán, Mantra, memory, science and literature
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: The Shape of Memory.................................................................1

Chapter 1: Rewriting the Memory of the God: Borges’s “La Memoria de Shakespeare” ........14

Chapter 2: *Los nudos blancos*: The Creation and Transmission of Memory

    in Piglia’s *La ciudad ausente* ..............................................................41

Chapter 3: Remember Me as an Episode of *The Twilight Zone*: Media, Memory,

    and Technology in Fresán’s *Mantra*.......................................................65

Conclusion........................................................................................................87

Works Cited.....................................................................................................89
INTRODUCTION:

THE SHAPE OF MEMORY
In the course of a day, a person will remember a staggering amount of information. These acts of remembrance may range from the mundane and automatic, such as how to tie shoelaces or a friend’s phone number, to the personal and emotional, such as mentally reliving a happy childhood afternoon or the death of a family member. The above examples show that the term “memory” covers a wide range of experiences, as the automatic experience of tying one’s shoes seemingly has little in common with the emotional experience of vividly recalling a joyous or tragic episode of one’s life. What the experiences do have in common, however, is the act of retrieving information stored in the brain at an earlier time, almost always with the purpose of using said information in the present, whether that use be practical or personal. And even within seemingly similar kinds of memories, there can be profound differences: for example, the effortless experience of remembering how to drive a car has a physical aspect that remembering the capital of Canada does not, just as a flood of memories brought on by an external stimulus is unlike the deliberate process of remembering one’s life to write an autobiography. Memories can be unreliable, yet at the same time they are absolutely essential to interacting with the world and functioning in any setting. In a word, memory is complicated, as illustrated by the opening paragraph of John Sutton’s entry on memory in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

‘Memory’ labels a diverse set of cognitive capacities by which we retain information and reconstruct past experiences, usually for present purposes. Memory is one of the most important ways by which our histories animate our current actions and experiences. Most notably, the human ability to conjure up long-gone but specific episodes of our lives is both familiar and puzzling, and is a key aspect of personal identity. Memory seems to be a source of knowledge. We remember experiences and events which are not happening now, so memory
differs from perception. We remember events which really happened, so memory is unlike pure imagination. Yet, in practice, there can be close interactions between remembering, perceiving, and imagining. Remembering is often suffused with emotion, and is closely involved in both extended affective states such as love and grief, and socially significant practices such as promising and commemorating. It is essential for much reasoning and decision-making, both individual and collective. It is connected in obscure ways with dreaming. Some memories are shaped by language, others by imagery. Much of our moral and social life depends on the peculiar ways in which we are embedded in time.

Memory goes wrong in mundane and minor, or in dramatic and disastrous ways.

The range of memory’s abilities is impressive, but equally notable are its failures, from forgetting a small piece of information to the loss of personal memories in Alzheimer’s disease. Due to the varying types and functions of memory, any attempt to understand it will face difficulties, and yet remembering is a process so common and so vital that to ignore it would be to ignore one of the most important of human abilities.

Perhaps because remembering is such a normal, everyday experience, it is often hard to take a step back and understand what is truly happening when one retrieves something from memory. So much of the process is automatic, and any attempt to discover its workings involves uncovering the hidden processes of the mind—the firing of millions of neurons that, somehow, can be interpreted as a conscious recollection of an event or an unconscious reaction to a stimuli or danger. For these reasons, the deeper workings of memory have interested many great minds working in different fields for the last two thousand years. From philosophers and poets to
psychologists and neuroscientists, countless answers to the question “What is memory?” exist, but through the years these answers have grown in specificity, as well as in type. Because memory is so integral to the human experience, it can be approached in any number of ways, as a moral or ethical problem or as a scientific inquiry, on anywhere from the molecular to the social level, in the present or throughout history. Indeed, “memory” serves as a daunting topic whether approached from a scientific, philosophical, literary, or even personal perspective, with each new angle adding to the overall understanding of memory, even if there are disagreements and contradictions; anything as universally experienced as memory is going to lead to contradictory ideas.

Essential to any attempt to understand memory is a system to separate the different types of memory in order to see the different kinds of memory both on their own and how they function in tandem with the others. Henry L. Roediger, a noted researcher in cognitive psychology, and his fellow researchers, note in a 2001 review of the different systems that have been used to classify kinds of memory that “the single term memory does not do justice to the underlying concepts it represents. Memories come in multifarious forms, and within each form the diverse kinds of memory are multifaceted” (32). With this range of functions, memory classifications systems can vary greatly, and while it is universally accepted that there are different kinds of memories, it is difficult to find such a universal consensus on exactly what the different kinds of memory are, even within the sciences. Furthermore, as Roediger and his colleagues note, important ideas on the function of memory and its classifications do not come only from science:

Memory is a single term, but refers to a multitude of human capacities. There are many different kinds of memory. Philosophers have analyzed memory for 2,000
years; psychologists have studied the topic experimentally for 115 years; and
neuroscientists have examined the neural bases of memory for the past 70 years.
All these attempts have revealed much about phenomena of memory—our
understanding has increased in leaps and bounds—but there remains no generally
agreed-upon classification of the kinds of memory that exist. (1)

Of course, different disciplines lead to some very different approaches to understanding the
phenomena of memory, from anecdotal observation to complex brain scans. Historically, much
of the inquiry into memory has been more interested in the purpose and results of memory, while
much of recent scientific inquiry looks for the mechanisms behind it, such as how memories are
formed and what happens in the brain when a memory is retrieved. In all of these different cases,
however, it is important to note what aspect of memory is of interest and remember that not all
memories are composed or used the same way.

The multitude of “kinds of memory” proposed through the years has led Endel Tulving, a
pioneer in cognitive neuroscience, to offer, jokingly, the following working definition: “A kind
of memory is the noun ‘memory’ preceded by an appropriate adjectival modifier” (256 Kinds
44). He goes on to offer a list of 256 different kinds of memory, making the point that memory is
extremely complicated and that if researchers are not careful they can find themselves dividing
and subdividing ad infinitum. Tulving is joking about his own work, as he has spent his career
investigating specific kinds of memory, and has helped to develop the widely-accepted idea of
episodic memory, a concept that is central to this thesis. The first important division in the
organization of memory is the divide between procedural and declarative memory. “Procedural
or nondeclarative knowledge,” notes Roediger, “often cannot be verbalized; in fact, people
may not even be aware that learning has occurred. Their behavior is characterized by ‘knowing how’ to do something rather than ‘knowing that’ they know it” (30). In other words, procedural memory is kind of subconscious memory that is used when walking, driving, skiing, or any number of mechanical tasks. Once such a skill is learned, remembering how to do it usually does not require any conscious thought, just the mechanical reproduction of the required motions.

Much more important to this thesis is declarative, or explicit, memory, the kind most often evoked by the word “memory.” Where procedural memory is to “know how,” declarative memory’s simplest definition is to “know that.” Within this kind of memory, there are two main divisions: semantic and episodic memory. Semantic memory involves the knowledge of facts and ideas, but not necessarily any kind of personal memory regarding that information. Sutton summarizes it as “memory for facts, the vast network of conceptual information underlying our general knowledge of the world: this is naturally expressed as ‘remembering that’” [emphasis in original] (5). This type of memory includes language and vocabulary, as well as the countless concepts required to navigate the world; for example, one can remember the meaning of a word, the population of New York, the years of the Second World War, or the colors of tie that would match a certain shirt. Even personal information and history can be stored in this way, as one can remember that they were born in California or that their eyes are brown without necessarily remembering any specific event or episode. In other words, semantic memory is memory as raw information that can be recalled. This process can be automatic, such as remembering and responding to one’s name, or conscious and deliberate, such as recalling the digits of pi.

The other key component of declarative memory is episodic memory. As its name implies, this type of memory brings to mind episodes from the past in a personal way. Unlike semantic memory, where one can remember that something happened, episodic memory recalls
something happening. Tulving defines it as “concerned with unique, concrete, personal experiences dated in the rememberer’s past” (Elements v). So, while remembering a vocabulary word may be the work of semantic memory, it is also possible for one to have an episodic memory of learning the word, such as remembering the time a teacher illustrated the word’s meaning. Semantic memories are based in a past time, unlike procedural and semantic memories which more simply recall information stored in the past. To recall something in the episodic sense is to relive it, to see the events unfold again, often with their attendant emotions; it is a kind of mental time travel, a personal narrative that makes the past present. Sutton states that “the most characteristic feature of episodic remembering, arguably, is the way it brings us into contact with the particular past events which such memories are about and by which they are caused” (6). While forgetting semantic information can be frustrating, losing episodic memories is often considered truly tragic, as recalling the past is key to one’s personal identity and mental wellbeing. For this reason, episodic memory is often called “personal memory” by philosophers (Sutton 6). While a piece of semantic information, such as the date of a parent’s death, may be shared between people, two children will have their own unique and personal episodic memories of the event. It is also important to note that any recollection of episodic events can call upon semantic information, such as language information, especially if it is retold or shared, and that the line between episodic and semantic memory is often debated.

Seen in this way, it is easy to understand the many connections between episodic memory and literature. Both are narrative in structure and bring some event, be it historical, personal, or fictional, to the forefront of the mind, allowing it to play or replay. Like memory, literature is a way to store information for future use, yet neither can be defined simply as stored information. Daniel L. Schacter, in defining exactly what memory is, says the following:
Consider another seemingly straightforward characterization of memory: the effects of experience that persist over time. Persistence over time is clearly a defining feature of any kind of memory, and such a definition would most certainly include episodic, semantic, and procedural forms. However, it would also include many phenomena that we probably do not want to label as ‘memory.’ Smashing a glass into a wall will produce an effect of experience that persists over time, but not too many of us would want to say that memory is involved, nor would we want to appeal to memory to explain the persisting effects of breaking an arm or a leg. (24)

In a parallel way, a written story about a broken leg or arm, fictional or not, creates a persisting effect of the injury, recreating the event on the plane of representation, but does not involve the persisting physical effects. Interestingly, just as literature can be defined as representation of a event, real or imagined, Schacter goes on to propose that, in order to include all generally accepted types of memory while still excluding the above-mentioned phenomena that make “persisting effects of experience” too broad a definition, one should “conceive of memory as a representation of past experiences that persists over time” [emphasis in original] (25). Indeed, the most vivid of personal memories are still representations of a past experience, and in no way physically recreate the circumstances of an event, just its effects on the mind. Whether in the brain or with the written word, the goal is to take some kind of information and transform it into a retrievable, repeatable representation.

Another key element of episodic memory that it shares with literature is that it seems to be self-aware and may be, in its full range, unique to humans, as Tulving notes: “Only human beings possess ‘autonoetic’ episodic memory and the ability to mentally travel into the past and
into the future” (Episodic Memory 4). Just as episodic memory is a universal human experience, storytelling is present throughout the world, and just as people can normally tell the difference between an event and its memorial representation, most know the difference between a narrative story and real life. Memory is autonoetic, or self-aware, and the brain can tell when it is remembering and when it is experiencing, just as fictional literature is quite often metafictional in nature and represents its own existence as representation. And just as literature can represent literature, one can remember having a memory, or remember a specific moment of recollection, creating similar levels of representation within representation. This ability to recreate past events in episodic fashion is also the basis of the ability to project into the future, imagining possible outcomes or creating purely fantastic situations.

Literature often presents itself as written memory, and often expresses directly both the power and the failures of memory. Indeed, El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha begins with this phrase: “En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme” (27), establishing from the beginning a problematic yet rewarding relationship between memory and the novel as genre. A great many novels are narrated from the perspective of a character sharing his memories of an event, and even those that use omniscient narration usually use the past tense, presenting the narration from the perspective of a perfectly perceptive, perfectly accurate memory. While many works of fiction present memory as a faithful representation of the past, others explore the holes and inaccuracies that are part of human remembering. Others explore the social and historical aspects of remembering the trauma of the past and present the reader with a chance to face the ghosts of the historical past. Narrative fiction may represent events that never occurred, but their mental representation can become as vivid and powerful as personal
memories. In her essay “The Literary Representation of Memory,” Birgit Neumann summarizes the way literature tends to explore memory’s intricacies:

Numerous texts portray how individuals and groups remember their past and how they construct identities on the basis of the recollected memories. They are concerned with the mnemonic presence of the past in the present, they re-examine the relationship between the past and the present, and they illuminate the manifold functions that memories fulfill for the constitution of identity. Such texts highlight that our memories are highly selective, and that the rendering of memories potentially tells us more about the rememberer’s present, his or her desire and denial, than about the actual past events. (333)

Indeed, literature is like memory in that, no matter how much it represents the past, in some way it reflects the present, perhaps in what we remember, perhaps in how we remember it. From the beginning, fiction has presented itself in the guise of memory, and just like memory has served to help establish identities and keep the past alive. Writing and experiencing fiction is a way to create a representation that, once ingested, becomes a memory in the mind of the reader, a new narrative that can be remembered episodically.

While memory has shaped the course of narrative fiction, it is also important to note that literature, science, and technology have shaped the way we understand memory, even in a lay sense. Douwe Draaisma, in Metaphors of Memory, points out that one of the oldest and most common ways of describing memory is the use of words describing books and writing, and that in the modern age new technologies have quickly been adopted as metaphors, such as photography or computer terminology—such as the word “retrieval,” which has been used numerous times in this introduction. He calls these technologies used to externalize memory
“artificial memories,” and notes that they “have not only supported, relieved and occasionally replaced natural memory, but they have also shaped our views of remembering and forgetting” (3). Indeed, we can even use fictional narrative to give our own experiences a narrative shape, as Neumann points out: “when interpreting our own experience, we constantly, and often unconsciously, draw on pre-existing narrative patterns as supplied by literature. Thus, by disseminating new interpretations of the past and new models of identity, fictions of memory may also influence how we, as readers, narrate our pasts and ourselves into existence” (341). There is a feedback loop between memory and literature, with each working to shape the other, allowing representations of real-life experience to become the stuff of fiction, and fiction to become memory. While memory can be, and should be, explored from the angles of culture, trauma, and ethics—all of which are well-explored fields of literary criticism—this thesis will use concepts from cognitive psychology as a framework to understand not just the effects of memory, but also its mechanics and its relationship with external, or artificial memories, from the written word to the computer and the television.

Using this conceptual framework, this thesis will begin with Jorge Luis Borges’s final published story, “La memoria de Shakespeare,” which will establish the concept of memoria ajena, or the phenomenon of remembering something from outside one’s own mind and personal experience. The protagonist, a German Shakespeare scholar, receives the playwright’s memories, which coexist with his own. Memory is one of the themes Borges revisits repeatedly in his work, but in this story he explores memory from the perspective of a man at the end of his life that has more memories than he can handle. The story shows not only the burden of memory, but also memory’s weaknesses and holes. In particular, Borges shows how memory is a process of rewriting and recontextualizing the past, one in which the present can influence the way we
remember the past. Above all, “La memoria de Shakespeare” shows how literature is a type of memoria ajena, capable of transmitting episodic memories into the mind of the reader.

This can also relate to other forms of technological memory, as is seen in Ricardo Piglia’s La ciudad ausente, where technology and memory become inseparable. The novel centers on a woman in Buenos Aires whose mind and body are incorporated into a storytelling machine; much of the novel is composed of her stories. Elena, the woman-machine, uses her stories to create fictionalized visions of her own personal experience, but she also brings in experiences and memories from others. This novel, unlike the other two works studied in this thesis, deals directly with Argentina and its recent history, including the trauma of the Dirty War. In La ciudad ausente, one of the short stories provides the concept of los nudos blancos, or the fixed points of memory. These nudos serve as the key to understanding the many stories in the novel, as they contain certain constants that can lead the reader to the central memories from which all of the stories and variations originate. Once again, literature is a powerful type of memoria ajena, allowing Elena’s stories to reach the people of Buenos Aires and create remembrance in place of state-imposed forgetfulness.

Finally, Rodrigo Fresán’s Mantra will show the way that modern media saturation can create countless memories, some as vivid and important as personal memory, but whose source lies in the television or movie screen rather than in some past experience. The novel is a kaleidoscopic representation of Mexico City as seen through countless references to other media, including television shows, films, songs, and literature. These allusions reflect the globalized, media-saturated modern world, and include works from Mexico, the United States, France, and elsewhere. The fragments of media are integral to the characters’ memories, and in many cases seem to become programmed responses. Like “La memoria de Shakespeare” and La ciudad
Mantra shows how the narrative we consume parallels memory in its episodic, narrative nature, and therefore has the power to become part of memory, which in turn becomes part of the media we create.

These three works, all from Argentine authors, have in common an explicit exploration of memory as a narrative form and its relation to external narratives. It should be noted that, while all three authors are Argentine, only Piglia’s novel deals with Argentina directly, and that these narratives share more thematically than they do from a historical or cultural perspective. These works seek to reflect the nature and workings of memory itself from the perspective of the modern subject. From Borges to Fresán, there is a progression of the source of memoria ajena, which begins by coming from Shakespeare, universally accepted as canonical literature, to the fragmentary sources of modern pop culture that range from the profound to the disposable, yet all leave their mark on the subject’s memory. These works express what it is to remember, what it means, and just how important it is to the self, even if it can be inaccurate or shaped by fiction. In fact, fiction can give memory meaning, in both a personal and a cultural sense, inspiring the mental narratives of life. Even if memoria ajena is all a subject has, he will clutch to it, for it gives him a past and a self, and without those life loses its narrative arc, and with that, its meaning.
REWRITING THE MEMORY OF THE GOD:

BORGES’S “LA MEMORIA DE SHAKESPEARE”

“I’ll note you in my book of memory.”
Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part 1 2.4

“Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,
But he’ll remember with advantages
What feats he did that day.”
Shakespeare, Henry V 5.2
In one of Jorge Luis Borges’s best-known works, “Funes el memorioso,” the eponymous character is paralyzed, yet possesses a perfect eidetic, or photographic, memory; no detail, no matter how minute, escapes his recall. Funes says, “Más recuerdos tengo yo solo que todos los hombres desde que el mundo es mundo.” However, this infinite collection of memories also leads him to declare that “Mi memoria, señor, es como vaciadero de basuras” (131). The narrator marvels at such limitless power to remember, going as far as to say that he considers himself unworthy to say that what he is doing as he recounts his experiences is truly remembering; yet the text clearly shows that for all of Funes’s memories, he never does anything with them or his astounding ability. He reads, sees, and recalls, without accomplishing anything other than creating his own numbering system where each number has its own arbitrarily assigned name, without any repetitions, such as Máximo Pérez for 7,014, or nueve for 500 (132-33). To Funes, such a numbering system appears logical, for each number is completely different from the others and should have a different name, but to be capable of learning and using such a complex system one would need Funes’s ability to remember an infinite list. In the end, this impressive use of memory serves only to exercise the young man’s ability; he is the only one capable of using the system, and it is therefore destined to die with him. Lorena Amaro Castro writes that “La memoria prodigiosa que impide el pensamiento—para Funes es imposible generalizar o abstraer: su mundo está lleno de detalles—sólo da como resultado un ser anulado por su propia y maravillosa capacidad” (189). Funes’s memory may be perfect, but to everyone else, and perhaps to Funes himself, this perfect ability is as useless as the body that holds him prisoner.

Funes’s memory, in its relentless attention to detail, is so unlike what is normally experienced as memory that the term cannot mean the same thing when applied to his astonishing ability. His inability to store information in categories or resort to symbolism or
abstraction makes his experience completely unlike that of the narrator. Funes, able to see and remember each and every individual thing he encounters perfectly and individually, finds human language grossly inadequate—hence the new and incredibly complicated numbering system he creates. Amazed, the narrator notes that “No sólo le costaba comprender que el símbolo genérico perro abarcara tantos individuos dispares de diversos tamaños y diversa forma; le molestaba que el perro de las tres y cuarto (visto de perfil) tuviera el mismo nombre que el perro de las tres y catorce (visto de frente)” (134). By gaining such a powerful memory, Funes has gone far beyond normal human memory, for human memory relies on symbolism and repetitive systems, such as the use of Arabic numerals and the decimal system to make an infinite string of numbers using only ten symbols. Normal human memory uses a constructive system; in other words, the brain remembers certain key pieces of information and then constructs memories around them, rather than store large amounts of fringe information. As Daniel L. Schacter and Donna Rose Addis note, “remembering the gist of what happened is an economical way of storing the most important aspects of our experiences without cluttering memory with trivial details” (“Ghosts” 445). In Funes’s mind, abstraction has drowned in a sea of minor details, and he is unable to escape the minutiae. His miraculous increase in memory deactivates the constructive element of his memory, an element necessary for more than just recalling the past. Schacter and Addis claim that the ability to imagine and project relies on the brain’s constructive abilities:

Future events are not exact replicas of past events, and a memory system that simply stored rote records would not be well-suited to simulating future events. A system built according to constructive principles may be a better tool for the job: it can draw on the elements and gist of the past, and extract, recombine and reassemble them into imaginary elements that never occurred in that exact form.
Such a system will occasionally produce memory errors, but it also provides considerable flexibility. (445)

For this reason, Funes cannot imagine or project, just see again the scenes of his past. His mind is more like an archive than a human memory, making his, in a way, the perfect memory of a god. In illustrating Funes’s marvelous capabilities, Borges seems to have pointed out just how useful an imperfect mind is, for a perfect one is nothing short of paralyzing, so filled with detail that life gets lost in the process.

At the end of his life, Borges returns to the theme of memory in a very different way in his last short story, “La memoria de Shakespeare.” The story is narrated by Hermann Soergel, an elderly German Shakespeare scholar, who serves as an obvious stand-in for Borges: aside from his age, love for Shakespeare, and academic nature, he is also partially blind. Soergel meets Daniel Thorpe at a Shakespeare conference in England, and Thorpe offers him the seemingly mystical gift of Shakespeare’s memory, which he accepts. Thorpe explains that the memory can be passed from person to person by simply offering it and accepting it, but that only one person can have it at a time. Soergel then begins to receive the bard’s memory, bit by bit, filling his mind with two separate yet coexisting sets of experiences. What seems, at the beginning, to be an amazing gift for a man who has devoted his life to Shakespeare, in the end proves to be a personal inferno. Soergel explains that “Con el tiempo, el gran río de Shakespeare amenazó, y casi anegó, mi modesto caudal” (79). The two memories mix and blur until the poor academic cannot place himself properly in the world around him. Even though Soergel, a Shakespeare scholar, seems like one of the best possible people to receive Shakespeare’s memory, much like Funes, he is unable to do anything with his marvelous gift, finding that any attempt at writing about Shakespeare or his works pales in comparison to the playwright’s great works. Isolated
and disoriented, Soergel decides to pass on the memory, and dials random phone numbers until a stranger on the other end accepts his strange offer. Finally free of his burden, Soergel decides to focus his studies on Bach in an attempt to leave Shakespeare behind forever; after all is said and done, Soergel does absolutely nothing with Shakespeare’s memories. In this story, Borges once again explores an extraordinary yet ultimately useless form of memory, seemingly affirming the importance of personal memories while recognizing that memory, if never externalized, dies with the rest of the body. While memory is an essential and powerful part of personal identity, Soergel comes to understand that it needs to be converted into literature if it is to live on in any meaningful way—for Borges, literature is memory made external and transmissible, and therefore valuable in a way personal memory is not.

Soergel receives the memory from Thorpe, a man that “exhalaba melancolía,” after meeting him in a Shakespeare conference. The scholars, joined by other academics, go to a pub to drink and talk. The narrator confesses that “Para sentirnos en Inglaterra (donde ya estábamos) apuramos en rituales jarros de peltre cerveza tibia y negra” (65). The night begins with a ritual, a simulacrum of the truth, where the participants need to play the part of men in England in order to feel like they are in England. In this environment of simulation, one of the men tells the story of a magic ring that, according to Islamic tradition, gives a man the ability to understand the language of the birds. The ring, which once belonged to King Solomon, falls into a beggar’s possession. Everybody knows that he has the ring, but it is a priceless item that the beggar cannot sell. Despite owning something of inestimable value, the beggar dies in front of a mosque. Soergel, Thorpe, and their companions discuss the fate of the ring:

—¿Y la sortija?—pregunté.
—Se perdió, según la costumbre de los objetos mágicos. Quizás esté ahora en algún escondrijo de la mezquita o en la mano de un hombre que vive en un lugar donde faltan los pájaros.

—O donde hay tantos —dije —que lo que dicen se confunde. (66)

This parable shows that the ring, while unique and magical, is only valuable when the man who has it understands and is able to use it; even then, the conditions must be ideal, for too many birds in the area will lead to confusion, while none will mean silence. For this reason, it is interesting that Thorpe refers to this story later in the night when he offers Shakespeare’s memory to Soergel, who appears to be the ideal man to receive this magic gift. However, by presenting the memory in this way, connected to an enchanted yet useless ring, Borges seems to establish from the beginning just how useless the memory will be for Soergel. Surely the memories of a man as important as Shakespeare constitute a priceless gift, but Thorpe is suggesting that the memory will only be useful in the hands of the right man in the right place.

The ritual that transfers Shakespeare’s memory from Thorpe to Soergel is almost absurdly simple—Thorpe asks Soergel if he accepts the memory, and Soergel says yes. Thorpe admits that during his time with the memory, which he received from a dying soldier somewhere in the Orient, he only has published “una biografía novelada que mereció el desdén de la crítica y algún éxito en los Estados Unidos y en las colonias” (69-70). Like the beggar in the story of the magic ring, Thorpe is unable to achieve much of anything in his time with two sets of memories. Perhaps Thorpe believes that Soergel, who has dedicated his life to the study of Shakespeare, will be able to do something worthy with the memory, something that he was never able to do. When Soergel accepts the memory, Thorpe explains that the gift will not appear immediately: “La memoria ya ha entrado en su conciencia, pero hay que descubrirla. Surgirá en sueños, en la
vigilia, al volver las hojas de un libro o al doblar una esquina. No se impaciente usted, no invente
recuerdos. El azar puede favorecerlo o demorarlo, según su misterioso modo. A medida que yo
vaya olvidando, usted recordará. No le prometo un plazo” (70-71). Only one person can have the
memory at any one time, and when one remembers, the other forgets, maintaining the personal
element of these memories. This play between remembering and forgetting reflects the nature of
memory, an uncertain process full of both inevitable and voluntary gaps. In spite of being a story
about memory, or perhaps because of it, “La memoria de Shakespeare” is also a story about
forgetting, as seen in the process of forgetting experiences first by Thorpe and later by Soergel.
The narrator notes that “Como la nuestra, la memoria de Shakespeare también incluía zonas,
grandes zonas de sombra, rechazadas voluntariamente por él” (76). Unlike Funes, who has no
choice but to remember constantly, Soergel makes a concerted effort to forget as the story goes
on, but only after suffering the torment of two coexisting and blurred sets of memories.

The genealogy of Shakespeare’s memory is not evident in the text, but since only one
person can have it at a time, the memory has possibly passed through a long chain of hosts. Each
host, like Soergel, needs to go through a process of remembering in order to get the memory, but
as Thorpe warns, there is the chance of impatiently inventing new memories, possibly without
even being aware that a memory is being invented. His warning, along with Soergel’s comments
on the holes and the vagueness of the playwright’s memories, seems to put everything Soergel
remembers from his second memory in doubt—how can he, or the reader, know what memories
are authentic and accurate? By extension, how can any subject be absolutely sure that personal
memories are not, in fact, false memories?

In the United States of the late 1980s and early 1990s, science began to take notice of the
problem of false memory after many highly publicized cases of otherwise psychologically
normal children and adults recovering vivid memories of sexual abuse or Satanic rites, many of which were later proven to be false or impossible. C. J. Brainerd and V. F. Reyna note that “Prior to that time, for instance, it would have been utterly redundant or, worse, affected, to qualify the word memory with the adjectives ‘true’ or ‘false’” [emphasis in original] (4). Until that time, science defined memory as recalling something that actually happened, but Brainerd and Reyna note that the idea of false memory has long been a concept in the realms of abnormal psychology, medicine, and, perhaps most notably, literature—showing up, of all places, in Shakespeare’s *Henry V* in the phrase “remembering with advantages” (5). Unlike normal failings of memory, where the process of recalling introduces holes or inaccuracies, false memories are constructed and lack a foundation in real events, but the subject believes them to be real. Any memory that Soergel purports to recall from Shakespeare’s memory could be one of these false memories, especially as his two memories become increasingly confused. Soergel may be going insane the whole time, inventing every Shakespearian memory, or remembering some things more or less accurately while inventing others, or he could be truly remembering with some degree of accuracy memories from Shakespeare’s personal experience. With the environment of simulacrum and the doubts introduced before Soergel even receives his first of Shakespeare’s memories, all of the above appear to be possibilities, and no clear answers are present.

Such doubt about the accuracy of memories is a reflection of the uncertainty present in any act of recollection: even if Soergel is recalling real events, there is always room for doubt about the accuracy of these memories, doubts which the text supports on multiple occasions. As noted above, unlike Funes, a normal human memory does not record every last detail, but rather captures the gist of an event in order to recreate it later. Schacter, in *The Seven Sins of Memory*, divides the various ways memory can fail into “seven fundamental transgressions or ‘sins,’
which I call *transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias, and persistence*” [emphasis in original] (4). He notes that the first three are sins of omission, where the mind cannot retrieve a desired piece of information or event, whereas the final four are sins of commission, where “some form of memory is present, but it is either incorrect or unwanted” (5). In the early stages of the story, Soergel wants to remember Shakespeare’s memories, but as Thorpe has warned, it is not an instantaneous process. The old academic needs to go through the process of remembering, but initially it seems that his attempts suffer from blocking, which Schacter characterizes as memory that “is lurking somewhere, seemingly poised to spring to mind with more prodding, but remains just out of reach when needed. Blocking is particularly vexing because at one and the same time, it seems perfectly clear that you should be able to produce the sought-after information in the face of irrefutable evidence that you cannot” (62). Soergel feels that he needs to seek out the memory of Shakespeare, to bring it to life, but his initial attempts fail. He confesses, while marveling that he will soon be able to recall Anne Hathaway just like he does his first lover, that his personal memories of his experience with that woman, many years earlier, are not so clear: “Trató de recordarla y sólo pude recordar el empapelado, que era amarillo, y la claridad que venía de la ventana. Este primer fracaso hubiera debido anticiparme los otros” (72). In a frustrating example of blocking, Soergel seems able to bring to mind only the information surrounding what he is seeking, able to remember the wallpaper but not the face of the woman. In similar fashion, he seems to have his initial attempts to recall certain memories blocked by misjudging the nature of the Bard’s memories: “Yo había postulado que las imágenes de la prodigiosa memoria serían, ante todo, visuales. Tal no fue el hecho” (72). The first memories that come to him, not while he is trying to remember but at unexpected moments such as while shaving, are bits of melodies and oral repetitions of Chaucer,
leading Soergel to conclude that he had found “el rasgo común de esas primeras revelaciones de una memoria que era, pese al esplendor de algunas metáforas, harto más auditiva que visual” (73). Perhaps because he initially does not understand the nature of Shakespeare’s memory, he finds himself unable to bring them to mind when he wants to, yet at surprising moments, without trying, he is able to do so. This is the first sign that the mystical gift of Shakespeare’s memory is not a perfect reproduction, like Funes’s endless mental archive, but rather a normal human memory, subject to the all-too-common experience of blocking, with the accompanying seemingly unexpected recall of random events.

In his attempt to understand the workings of his mysterious new memories, Soergel turns to an old metaphor of memory: “De Quincey afirma que el cerebro del hombre es un palimpsesto. Cada nueva escritura cubre la escritura anterior y es cubierta por la que sigue, pero la todopoderosa memoria puede exhumar cualquier impresión, por momentánea que haya sido, si le dan el estímulo suficiente” (73). This is a concept of memory rooted firmly in medieval writing practices, where monks, lacking enough parchment to write on, would white out a previous text in order to transcribe another over it. Upon close inspection, the previous text is still visible, and perhaps even legible. As Thomas De Quincey writes: “The traces of each successive handwriting, regularly effaced, as had been imagined, have, in the inverse order, been regularly called back: the footsteps of the game pursued, wolf or stag, in each several chase, have been unlinked, and hunted back through all their doubles” (345). Associating this with memory, De Quincey suggests that old memories need the proper stimulus in order to come to the surface from under the layers of newer memories, just as the proper chemistry can uncover the previous writings of a palimpsest; it is as simple, and as complicated, as following the traces back and untying the memory from those above it, keeping it down. Believing this to be the case, Soergel
determines to uncover Shakespeare’s memories by reading the works the playwright read in his life. “Yo poseía de manera latente la memoria de Shakespeare;” he notes. “La lectura, es decir la relectura, de esos viejos volúmenes sería el estímulo que buscaba” (74). He turns to Chaucer, Marlowe, and others, hoping that these works of literature will serve as the key to unearthing Shakespeare’s memories. He also tries to visit Shakespeare’s home town, but says that “Una visita a Stratford-on-Avon fue, previsiblemente, estéril” (74). He struggles to find the right stimulus, but believes that once he will unearth a whole, unchanged memory, believing that Shakespeare’s life lays buried under his lifetime of memories.

However, as Soergel remembers more, he once again finds his expectations of Shakespeare’s memory to be inaccurate: “No me fueron deparadas, como a De Quincey, pesadillas espléndidas” (74). Instead, he finds images and faces coming to his mind as he dreams at night. Once again, the scholar is forced to reexamine his concept of memory:

Quien adquiere una enciclopedia no adquiere cada línea, cada párrafo, cada página y cada grabado; adquiere la mera posibilidad de conocer alguna de esas cosas. Si ello acontece con un ente concreto y relativamente sencillo, dado el orden alfabético de las partes, ¿qué no acontecerá con un ente abstracto y variable, ondoyant et divers, como la mágica memoria de un muerto? (75).

Now memory is not a palimpsest but a disordered encyclopedia, and Soergel is no longer dedicated to unearthing every intact detail, for he recognizes the abstract and variable nature of memory. He goes on to say that “La memoria del hombre no es una suma; es un desorden de posibilidades indefinidas” (76). Just like a normal human memory, Shakespeare’s memory is subject to the same quirks that make memory so fascinating and so frustrating. When certain details are desired, those very details can be blocked; when not trying to remember anything in
particular, melodies and faces can flood into the mind. There are holes, “grandes zonas de sombra” (76), some of them things Shakespeare had voluntarily forgotten. Shakespeare’s memory, unlike Funes’s, seems to be normal and flawed like any other.

There is an aspect of memory that never occurs to Soergel, and that is the way that remembering changes memories. He envisions a disordered, vague encyclopedia, but he never considers the possibility that he is writing or changing some of the entries. Memory, as noted earlier, tends to be a record of the gist of an event, and not every exact detail, meaning that memory is a kind of shorthand. Joseph Ledoux, a New York University neuroscientist, explains that memory goes through a stage of consolidation—the initial recording of memory—and reconsolidation, or the process of retrieving a memory: “Reconsolidation is essentially an updating process. After consolidation, a memory remains unchanged until it is retrieved. At that point, the brain has the opportunity to incorporate new information into the memory, things that have been learned since the memory was stored initially” (“Remembering”). Without the rememberer’s knowledge, facts that the person knows now can become part of the memory of the past, as can current emotional states or beliefs on a topic. For example, a 1982 University of Texas study found that, while subject’s opinions on nuclear power did not affect their recollection of an article on the subject immediately after reading, later, “subjects were more likely to recognize belief-consistent information; this was true both for actual material from the passage and for distortions and introductions to it” (Read and Rosson 240). This finding has been reproduced in numerous settings and in different situations in the intervening decades, as summarized by Harvard professor of psychology Daniel Gilbert:

This general finding—that information acquired after an event alters memory of the event—has been replicated so many times in so many different laboratory
settings and field settings that is has left most scientists convinced of two things. First, the act of remembering involves filling in details that were not actually stored; and second, we generally cannot tell when we are doing this because filling in happens quickly and unconsciously. (79-80)

Much like the time-travel stories that fill science fiction, where someone from the future goes back to change the past, the mental time travel of memory always brings a piece of present with it and changes the mind’s representation of the past. Unlike the frustration of being unable to recall a desired fact, this subconscious process of rewriting memories during recall is a natural process that only later, perhaps in the fact of contradictory evidence, comes to light.

Unlike De Quincey’s palimpsest or Soergel’s encyclopedia, then, memory is capable of contamination and change, and if it is still a kind of writing, it is one that changes. Gilbert provides a useful metaphor for this concept of rewritable memory: “Memory is not a dutiful scribe that keeps a complete transcript of our experiences, but a sophisticated editor that clips and saves key elements of an experience and then uses these elements to rewrite the story each time we ask to reread it” (197). This editor can reject old information or replace it, especially when current opinions or knowledge contradict previously stored information; the changes are usually small, but over time they can add up to a radical change in the makeup of a memory. However, this also means that any act of remembering is a potential act of rewriting, and that the more something is remembered the more opportunities for rewriting there are. Ledoux summarizes the problem this way:

The bottom line of reconsolidation research is that your memory of some experience is only as good as your last recollection of the experience. Each use of a memory changes the memory. [. . .]
The only way a memory remains ‘pure’ and resistant to change is by never being used. The most accurate memories are indeed the ones never remembered. (“Remembering”)

Of course, this creates a paradox, especially when the accuracy of a memory is in question. Remembering leads to rewriting, pushing the original, more accurate memory farther back and replacing it, but the only way to maintain accuracy is not to recall the event. Any memory can be subject to this kind of doubt, but Borges has already shown that the detail-rich alternative of Funes’s exact reproduction of the past destroys the ability to project or abstract. Schacter sees this process of rewriting, as well as many of memory’s shortcomings or “sins,” to be the byproducts of a mental system for storing memories that needs to be inexact:

The seven sins are not merely nuisances to minimize or avoid. They also illuminate how memory draws on the past to inform the present, preserves elements of present experience for future reference, and allows us to revisit the past at will. Memory’s vices are also its virtues, elements of a bridge across time which allows us to link the mind with the world. (Seven Sins 206)

In other words, memory’s problems, such as rewriting, are the side-effects of having a mind that can generalize or use memory to imagine and project. Shakespeare’s mind was undoubtedly able to do this, using history and language to create the plays that live on hundreds of years later. Shakespeare’s memory is worthy of this “sophisticated editor” metaphor, and is not the lesser for any inaccuracies or holes it may have; in fact, these failures of memory are part of the same processes that allowed the creation of his imaginative work.

The text shows evidence that Soergel is unknowingly rewriting Shakespeare’s memory, and given who he is, it is no surprise. The man has dedicated his professional life to studying
Shakespeare, and admits to having certain preconceived notions about the nature of the memory; for example, he first expects the memory to be primarily visual because of Shakespeare’s metaphors, and he expects that reading—a literary pursuit—will be the stimulus needed to bring the memories out from under the palimpsest of his mind. Soergel is a literary being, a man who seems to live more of his life in books than in the world, and he expects Shakespeare to be the same way, focused primarily mainly on his works. The ritual reading of the books Shakespeare would have read serves as an echo of the night that Soergel and Thorpe drink beer in a pub in order to feel like they are England, only here Soergel reads literature in order to feel like he has his literary god’s memory. For Soergel, biographical and historical stimuli are of less importance, as seen in his fruitless visit to Stratford-on-Avon, which may also contribute to his initial failures in remembering personal details, such as Anne Hathaway’s face. But as more of the memories come to the surface, he continues to focus on the literary rather than the personal, and his ritual readings serve as a sign that he is reconstructing the memory to fit the shape of his literary mind. In particular, he notes that “Las aparentes negligencias de Shakespeare, esas absence dans l’infini de que apologéticamente habla Hugo, fueron deliberadas. Shakespeare las toleró, o intercaló, para que su discurso, destinado a la escena, pareciera espontáneo y no demasiado pulido y artificial” (77). Conveniently, Soergel remembers even Shakespeare’s literary mistakes or gaps as intentional, exactly the way someone who worships Shakespeare would. Because of the uncertainty inherent in memory, there is no way to tell if this is an authentic memory or an addition by Soergel’s mental editor, which would desire to see the playwright in as positive a light as possible. Soergel even believes he has discovered a deep guilt in Shakespeare’s memory, but chooses not to probe and discover what it is, content to say “Básteme declarar que esa culpa nada tenía en común con la perversion” (78). The situation is
complicated if one takes into account all of the previous hosts to Shakespeare’s memory—
Thorpe and the soldier that gave him the memory would have left their marks on the memory, as
would the other unknown hosts. In fact, not even Shakespeare could be certain that the details of
his memories were accurate. And so, with each act of remembering the previous memory has
been not just buried, but rewritten in small ways, leaving the “original” memory, itself not a
detailed record but a collection of important points, inaccessible forever. Soergel’s error lies not
in trying to recall Shakespeare’s memories, but in assuming they will be accurate and pure, as
such memories do not exist. What does exist is the play between writing and rewriting, between
pasts and presents, which can create that unique experience known as literature.

The interplay between past and present that is the trademark of any act of episodic, or
personal, memory is present in this work as well. Initially, Soergel finds the new memories to be
invigorating: “Durante una semana de curiosa felicidad, casi creí ser Shakespeare. La obra se
renovó para mí” (76-77). His readings of the plays and sonnets, informed by centuries of
scholarship on the subject, are suddenly inspired by the personal memories of the author, but this
state lasts a short time. As time goes on, Shakespeare’s memories dominate his mind, turning
happiness into “la opresión y el terror” (79). The mystical memory takes over, and Soergel
begins to lose his ability to function in the present, starting with an increasing preference for
English over German, and culminating in moments of sheer confusion at the sights of a modern
city. Soergel fears for his sanity, stating that “Ya que la identidad personal se basa en la
memoria, temí por mi razón” (79-80). Indeed, where before he seems to be painting a memory of
the past with the colors of his present, the past begins to control his present. Personal memory is
not just a comforting presence, it is absolutely essential to maintaining personal identity. Daniel
Gustavo Teobaldi sees a trend in Borges’s writing, one that ties memory and reading to a search for the origins:

> El ejercicio de la memoria no significa, exclusivamente, el simple acto de recordar, sino que implica un remontarse hasta los orígenes de los hechos con el propósito de actualizarlos. El que recuerda transfigura en palabra el origen, y pone en escena ese origen. Por lo tanto, al recordar el escritor hace presente un pasado, y cuando esa acción aparece asistida por la comunidad de lectores—o auditores—el escritor o narrador los está conectando con sus propios orígenes. En esto reside la importancia de la memoria, y este es el sentido que adquiere en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges. (2)

Soergel’s torment comes from the increasing strength of the past made present, not because this past is tragic or painful, but because it is so removed from the present that it creates nothing but growing disorientation. It is one thing for the rememberer to link his present to the past of one lifetime, and another to find memories hundreds of years old coming to the surface and blurring into a very different world. The joy of being Shakespeare, in a way, turns into the fear of becoming Shakespeare, annihilating Hermann Soergel’s personal memories in the process. Soergel wanted to get to the origins of Shakespeare, and now he pays the consequence of those origins reaching far beyond the modern world.

This mental crisis shows that, while riddled with quirks, personal memory is absolutely essential to our most cherished notions of personal identity, just as Soergel states. At its worst, Soergel says, “Empecé a no entender las cotidianas cosas que me rodeaban” (80). This suggests that Soergel has not only received Shakespeare’s episodic memories, but also his semantic memory, the portion of memory that recalls information independent of past personal
experiences. In the present the old scholar sees metal and glass buildings, but his mind calls upon the wrong memory, Shakespeare’s, which has no prior experience with such forms and cannot recognize them. “Estaba en el infierno,” he confesses, and he finds the experience increasingly heavy on his mind: “A medida que transcurren los años, todo hombre está obligado a sobrellevar la creciente carga de su memoria. Dos me agobiaban, confundiéndose a veces” (80). Considering even one memory a burden, Soergel finds having two memories blurred together to be too much to bear. In a number of illuminating thought experiments, philosopher Derek Parfit employs the concept of quasi-memories, or memory explored independent of whether or not the memory is true or accurate, to explore an experience like Soergel’s. According to Parfit,

I have an accurate quasi-memory of a past experience if

(1) I seem to remember having an experience

(2) someone did have this experience,

and

(3) my apparent memory is casually dependent, in the right kind of way, on that past experience.

On this definition, ordinary memories are a sub-class of quasi-memories. They are quasi-memories of our own past experiences. [emphasis in original] (220)

Soergel’s Shakespearian memories of long-past experiences are perhaps better defined in this way, for they did not happen to him personally. In one way or another, all of Shakespeare’s memories, when Soergel recalls them, can be considered false memories: on one hand, all of the memories could be complete or partial inventions from Soergel’s mind; on the other, even if Shakespeare’s personal memories are accurate, they did not happen to Soergel, and recalling these memories in first person makes them inaccurate in a way, as the people in the memory are
not laughing at nor speaking to Soergel, the rememberer, but Shakespeare. The concept of the quasi-memory allows this second set of memories to escape the dismissing designation of “false,” instead allowing them to be an alternate kind of memory, where memories are not less important or powerful just because they are not part of one’s personal experience. They differ only in origin.

Parfit uses an imaginary situation involving Jane and Paul to explore this concept. Jane has received an implantation of some of Paul’s memories into her mind, just as Soergel receives Shakespeare’s memories into his mind. Some memories, such as visiting a country she has never visited or shaving her beard, are obviously quasi-memories from Paul. However, as Parfit notes, in some cases it would be impossible to know which memories come from whom, which would require a shift in the way the rememberer approaches his own memories:

Because we do not have quasi-memories of other people’s past experiences, our apparent memories do not merely come to us in the first-person mode. They come with a belief that, unless they are delusions, they are about our own experiences. But, in the case of experience-memories, this is a separable belief. If like Jane we had quasi-memories of other people’s past experiences, these apparent memories would cease to be automatically combined with this belief. (222)

For this reason, Soergel cannot simply believe in his memories like before. While details and opinions can change in the course of remembering, in most cases a rememberer feels certain that his memories come from his own experiences, to the degree that the question usually does not even arise. Soergel’s torment arrives from being unable to trust in his memories, causing him to be a subject increasingly separated from the time in which he lives. Thorpe warns of this when he tells Soergel about the memory: “dos memorias me tienen. Hay una zona en que se
confunden. Hay una cara de mujer que no sé a qué siglo atribuir” (69). It is no surprise that the same happens to Soergel, to the extent that at times Shakespeare’s memories, so incompatible with Soergel’s world, seem to be completely dominant. The quasi-memories that fill his mind have the same power whether or not they come from his life or the playwright’s. Mike Wilson Reginato, while exploring the relationship between Shakespeare’s memories and Soergel’s identity, explains that “El injerto de memoria no deja una transición de conocimiento completo, sino que deja un rastro de identidad y presencia. [. . .] Por su modo de función, la identidad en vigencia no tiene forma de distinguir entre una memoria propia y la herencia de una *cuasi*-memoria” [emphasis in original] (10-11). In this sense, Shakespeare’s memory proves to be not only subject to the rewrites of Soergel’s mental editor, but also capable of having real effects on Soergel’s present. However, even the solitary Soergel needs to be connected to his world, and being unable to position himself in his present leads him to make random phone calls until a stranger accepts the memory from him.

Just as he actively tries to bring Shakespeare to his memory, Soergel also makes a concerted effort to forget: “Yo había imaginado disciplinas para despertar la antigua memoria; hube de buscar otras para borrarlas.” He tries studying William Blake, among other things, but finds that “Ese y otros caminos fueron inútiles; todos me llevaban a Shakespeare” (82). Now, the blending of memories makes forgetting difficult, as Soergel has spent his life studying Shakespeare and finds connections to him in all he studies. Where before he struggles to bring Shakespeare’s memory to mind, he now finds reminders that bring the other memory to the surface unintentionally. He eventually finally finds solace in Bach’s music, and feels he is able to become, once again, Hermann Soergel. But even later, as the postscript reveals, Soergel discovers that he has not forgotten completely: “pero en el alba sé, alguna vez, que el que sueña
es el otro. De tarde en tarde me sorprenden pequeñas y fugaces memorias que acaso son auténticas” (82). Even if the original memories have left Soergel’s mind, they have left their mark. These memories spend a time as an important part of Soergel’s present, and in that time seem to have left their traces on Soergel’s memories. It is also interesting to note that Soergel, who claims to have passed the memory on to the man on the phone, can still remember remembering the memories. While he may no longer remember Shakespeare’s experiences, he obviously remembers, and is narrating, the experiences he has with those memories. As all memories are representations, this story is a representation of a man’s mind representing a virtually endless chain of representations. The final line, claiming that these random glimpses of memory may be authentic, not only shows the doubt inherent in Soergel’s quasi-memories, but in all acts of remembering. Every act of remembrance is a representation, and each successive remembering proves to be a new representation based on the previous one as well as present circumstances. At the same time, these representations shape the perception of the present, and are necessary to function in the world. “La memoria de Shakespeare” serves as an illustration of the way memory allows both past and present influence each other, for neither can escape the power of the other.

Soergel’s time with the memory is as fruitless as it is frustrating—much like Funes, he has an astounding gift of memory and can do nothing with it. He seems to realize this from the beginning: “De algún modo, yo sería Shakespeare. No escribiría las tragedias ni los intricados sonetos, pero recordaría el instante en que me fueron reveladas las brujas” (71-72). Soergel feels that he will be Shakespeare in a way, but at the same time realizes that he will not do that which made Shakespeare who he is—write. With his reading of the playwright’s work invigorated, Soergel decides to write a biography, just as Thorpe did, but fails in his attempt, claiming that he
does not know how to narrate; he goes so far as to say that his own experience with Shakespeare’s memory is far more interesting than Shakespeare’s life. In the end, Soergel gives up his attempt, realizes the limits of both Shakespeare’s memory and his own abilities:

“Comprendí que las tres facultades del alma humana, memoria, entendimiento y voluntad, no son una ficción escolástica. La memoria de Shakespeare no podía revelarme otra cosa que las circunstancias de Shakespeare. Es evidente que éstas no constituyen la singularidad del poeta; lo que importa es la obra que ejecutó con ese material deleznable” (78). He continues:

El azar o el destino dieron a Shakespeare las triviales cosas terribles que todo hombre conoce; él supo transmutarlas en fábulas, en personajes mucho más vividos que el hombre gris que los soñó, en versos que no dejarán caer las generaciones, en música verbal. ¿A qué destejer esa red, a qué minar la torre, a qué reducir las módicas proporciones de una biografía documental o de una novela realista el sonido y la furia de Macbeth? (78-79)

In other words, Shakespeare’s memories are not what made him the great writer he is. Soergel has Shakespeare’s episodic and semantic memories, but he lacks the procedural aspects of that great mind, the abilities to write and narrate, to convert the “material deleznable” of memory into something eternal and powerful. Shakespeare drew from his memory and knowledge to write, but these things were just the building blocks, and he was a far greater architect than Soergel. Indeed, Soergel finds that Shakespeare is an “hombre gris,” a man whose life pales in comparison to the life and creativity of his works. Why write about a man’s life when his writings are the true source of his importance?

Therefore, memory, in order to endure, must be converted into literature, into writing. In this way, literature becomes an externalized, collective memory, able to endure long past the
death of the brain. Draaisma explains that among the many metaphors of memory, none are as old or as persistent as the connection between writing and memory:

In the history of Western culture there has always been a close link between memory and writing. The Latin *memoria* had a double meaning: ‘memory’ and ‘memoir.’ Earlier, now obsolete, uses of the English noun ‘memorial’ included both ‘(a) memory’ and ‘written record.’ This duality underlines the link between human memory and the means invented to record knowledge independently of that memory. From the very beginning, that is, from the wax tablet onwards, human remembering and forgetting has been described in terms derived from prosthetic memories. (24)

“La memoria de Shakespeare” contains an element of fantasy which allows Shakespeare’s memories to escape the death of the body, allowing it to pass from man to man through the centuries, but this only serves to point out that Shakespeare is not great for what he knew, but for what he wrote, what he made from his memories. Memory, even the most extraordinary forms of it, serves to help one understand one’s identity and to place oneself in the world, but Soergel wants to do more with it, to make it external so that others can experience it. He realizes how Shakespeare has transformed his experiences into something lasting and beautiful, and that those experiences are dull in comparison with his writings. Literature gives memory the chance not only to survive the death of the individual, but also to transform it into something sublime. It gives one man’s memories the chance to be rewritten and played in the minds of countless readers over hundreds of years. Biago D’Angelo, in his exploration of the role of memory in Borges’s writings, makes the following connection between memory and literature:
Si es verdad que ‘toda narración, autobiográfica o novelesca, depende de la memoria de alguien,’ no cabe duda que cualquier relato ficcional imita y re-escriba una forma de memoria subjetiva, atestándose en la contribución de la colectiva y determinando, a través de la escritura, y de sus simbologías y metáforas, un metarrelato que es metamemoria. Escribir es hacer memoria, recordar, ‘mnemonizar’ actos, gestos, pasiones, en un binomio que casi choca hasta la identificación. Literatura es memoria, escribir un relato es convertir la memoria en un gesto eterno. […] La memoria para ‘auto-realizarse,’ es decir, para permanecer al fluir del tiempo, tiene que ser transformada por la poética autorial, para no caerse en el olvido debe convertirse en acto literario. (68-69)

For Soergel, Shakespeare is the supreme example of memory made into literature, of experiences made into lasting words that have inspired centuries of readers. Even though Soergel’s experiences are more interesting, Shakespeare’s writings are undoubtedly superior, and therefore destined to survive on paper and in the minds of readers.

The question remains: why Shakespeare? Soergel is German, but has chosen Shakespeare from the literary pantheon—a seemingly surprising choice. Soergel does not receive the memory of Goethe or Kafka, neither does Borges employ Cervantes or a writer from Spanish tradition. Soergel provides a clue when he calls his studies “el culto de Shakespeare” (79). To him, studying Shakespeare is more than a profession or an obsession—it is a religion, which makes Shakespeare his god. Soergel is a stand-in for Borges, and therefore it is no surprise that throughout Borges’s work, Shakespeare appears numerous times, often in this divine role. Grace Tiffany traces this presence through several stories and poems, and concludes that “the story ‘Shakespeare’s Memory,’ the poem ‘The Thing I Am,’ and the essay ‘Historia de los ecos de un
nombre,’ considered together, liken Borges to Parolles, human creator of illegitimate fictions; and Shakespeare to God, divine speaker of the creating word” (146). In this way, Borges compares himself to the liar from All’s Well that Ends Well, but Shakespeare represents the best of literature, and having Shakespeare’s memory would equate to having the memory of Borges’s literary god. Borges’s “Everything and Nothing” even ends with this confession from the voice of God directed to Shakespeare: “Yo tampoco soy; yo soñé el mundo como tú soñaste tu obra, mi Shakespeare, y entre las formas de mi sueño estabas tú, que como yo eres muchos y nadie” (55). Where Funes has a memory that is godlike in its detail, Soergel receives the memory of a literary god, who is nonetheless very human and not without his flaws. Borges understands that this gift, miraculous as it is, does not confer the power to reach the heights Shakespeare has, and seems to agree with Soergel, who quotes Shakespeare to declare that “Simply the thing I am shall make me live” (79). In his attempts to forget, and free himself of Shakespeare, Soergel attempts to replace Shakespeare with other writers, such as William Blake, but in a world where Shakespeare is God, all literature bears testimony of his presence—hence the need for Soergel to find a new religion in the world of music, away from the words that remind him of his former faith. Even so, as the postscript explains, Soergel is never able to truly escape Shakespeare or his memories, like a long-held faith that forever leaves its mark on the believer, even long after he has lost his faith.

María Esther Vázquez believes that “‘La memoria de Shakespeare’ es como un compendio, un resumen de todo lo que Borges escribió antes, pero reelaborado para demostrar algo terrible: a medida que transcurre el tiempo, el hombre está obligado a ‘sobrellevar la creciente carga de la memoria’ como si tratara de un peso insoportable que agobia el alma” (481). We see in this story various themes that accompanied Borges throughout his life,
especially those of memory, identity, Shakespeare, and literature itself. Finding himself close to
death, to forgetting, Borges uses this story to show how personal memory is powerless and
destined to die, while literature will continue with humankind until the end. The melancholy that
accompanies Soergel, a man tired of remembering, is almost tangible. Literature is a strange
connection with the rest of humanity, at once indirect and personal, distant and intimate. It is
memoria ajena, memory from outside of the subject, memories of things that happened in other
lives or other planes of existence, yet still able to come to mind in distinct, seemingly personal
episodes. Ricardo Piglia’s analysis of this story provides this summarizing statement regarding
the power of memory and literature in Borges’s work:

La práctica arcaica y solitaria de la literatura es, por supuesto, la réplica (sería
mejor decir el universo paralelo) que Borges erige para olvidar el horror de lo
real. La literatura reproduce las formas y los dilemas de ese mundo estereotipado,
pero en otro registro, en otra dimensión, como en un sueño. En el mismo sentido
la figura de la memoria ajena es la clave que le permite a Borges definir la
tradición poética y la herencia cultural. Recordar con una memoria extraña es una
variante del tema del doble pero es también una metáfora perfecta de la
experiencia literaria. La lectura es el arte de construir una memoria personal a
partir de experiencias y recuerdos ajenos. Las escenas de los libros leídos vuelven
como recuerdos privados. (“Shakespeare”)

Borges, who lived his life in a world of books, provides his double in this story with the chance
to forget, in part, the hell that remembering too much has caused him. Of course, these memories
have left their mark on Soergel’s mind, as all memories leave their reciprocal mark on the
present. In the world of literature, like that of memory, it is true that each reading in the present
can add something new to or overlook some detail in what the author originally created, but
some kind of external narrative is the only for memory to survive, to avoid death and oblivion.
With “Funes el memorioso,” Borges illustrates the horror of remembering everything; with “La
memoria de Shakespeare,” he shows the horror of not being able to convert memory into
something creative. Like Shakespeare, Borges has created works that have the power to “volver
como recuerdos privados,” as Piglia puts it. Like all great literature, his writings transcend the
details of his relatively plain life, uniting with the sea of written words that serve as a cultural
memory. In the end, it is what the author creates, and not the author himself with his fallible
mind, that truly matters. With his death, Borges’s personal memories disappeared forever, but his
writings have allowed pieces of that memory, mutated and changed, to enter the mind of his
readers, making his into a form of memoria ajena, capable of entering the mind like a second
memory and staying there.
LOS NUDOS BLANCOS:
THE CREATION AND TRANSMISSION OF MEMORY IN PIGLIA’S LA CIUDAD
AUSENTE

“So please, remember me mistakenly
In the window of the tallest tower.”
Iron & Wine, “The Trapeze Swinger”

“One day, I’m telling you,
They’ll make a memory machine
To wax our hearts to a blinding sheen,
To wash away the grief.”
The Dismemberment Plan, “Memory Machine”
Borges, in “La memoria de Shakespeare,” makes the following statement: “A medida que transcurren los años, todo hombre está obligado a sobrellevar la creciente carga de su memoria” (80). Seen this way, memory is an ever-growing burden in which all of the experiences of the past accumulate and even haunt the rememberer. The many episodes that make up the past add to the countless memories that fill the mind and do not allow true forgetting, for as the mind faces the present it continuously turns to the past to understand what it sees and feels. Nevertheless, these same sensations and emotions are able to reshape and change memory, making remembering the uncertain process it is. And while memory can allow the subject to relive the best and happiest parts of the past, it can also revive the horrors and trauma of the worst moments of life and history. Yet, no matter how bad the past is, there is a human need to find out its circumstances and effects. From this need comes the detective story, where some information from the past has disappeared and the detective, the agent of memory, needs to unearth the past so it can be remembered properly, the way it really happened. Usually this is a tragic past, one that the perpetrators of some crime have intentionally tried to erase, and the detective must find his way through lies, inaccuracies, and half-truths to reconstruct the event just as they happened. Junior, the journalist whose investigations motivate the plot of Ricardo Piglia’s *La ciudad ausente*, serves as the detective that tries to find out the origins of a mysterious machine that is creating stories that are circulating through Buenos Aires. Unlike traditional detective novels, however, Junior never finds concrete truths, but rather a net of fragmentary stories that do not provide easy answers; instead, they serve to further complicate the facts, blur identities, and question the nature of the novel’s take on reality. Neither Junior nor the reader have the information necessary to untangle all of these connected stories, but it is possible to find certain stable points in the chaos, symbolized in the novel as *nudos blancos*, such as people, events, and
phrases that appear in various forms throughout the tales told by the characters and the machine. Junior’s investigations fail to discover the original facts, but they do uncover other hidden truths about the nature of memory itself, and its creation and transmission in a technological world. Junior, despite failing in the traditional sense of the detective story, serves as an agent of memory, finding truths in the face of institutional forgetfulness promoted by a postdictatorial government that wishes to bury its many past offenses. Unlike the traditional detective story, La ciudad ausente never provides a final resolution where order is restored or a trustworthy chronological reconstruction is presented. What the reader finds instead is a map of memory itself, a series of nudos blancos that reflect the essential functions of both personal and collective memory.

Although La ciudad ausente begins with several traditional elements of detective fiction, the most obvious being an urban mystery and a solitary investigator, the novel quickly begins to show that it is a literary chimera, with various traits that make its classification difficult. As Edgardo E. Berg writes,

con La ciudad ausente Piglia continúa la línea de experimentación con los géneros, ahora cruzando ciertas marcas policiales con algunos motivos del ‘fantasy’ contemporáneo o la ciencia ficción. El texto moviliza y corroe constantemente los sistemas de referencia, subjuntiviza el modo real e instala el espacio de los posibles narrativos. (40)

Junior, the lonely journalist, receives strange phone calls regarding a machine that is creating stories from a woman who sometimes offers him the news in advance. His editor, Renzi, adds to his curiosity about the machine by giving him a recording that ends up being the first of the many shorter stories that take control of the novel as it progresses. As Junior investigates more
and gets closer to the machine and its origins, he finds himself in a world that is increasingly science fiction-like in nature, including tragic cyborgs, strange scientists, mechanical birds, and dystopic paranoia brought on by a technological dictatorship. Junior discovers that the machine was invented to create variations of Edgar Allan Poe stories, but when the inventor, Macedonio Fernández, loses his wife, he and a German scientist incorporate her body into the machine. Elena, Macedonio’s dead wife, becomes the cyborg machine that is the source of the connected stories that Junior and the reader encounter. The stories incorporate elements of history and serve as testimonials not only of Elena’s experiences but also of the terrible state abuses in Argentina during the Dirty War and the hope for future freedom. By incorporating these elements and converting them into stories that circulate through the city, she becomes a mix of human and artificial memory, just as her body is a mix of flesh and machine.

A great deal of the critical attention the novel has received centers around the way the novel deals with the memories of Argentina’s dictatorial past. Malva E. Filer notes that the presence of multiple stories serves to undermine the collective silence of postdictatorship society: “La máquina de *La ciudad ausente* se define, precisamente, por su capacidad de preservar, permutar y multiplicar los relatos, en una sociedad que convive, sin confrontarlos, con sus fantasmas ocultos” (134). Similarly, Jorge Fornet places the publication of the novel firmly within the historical situation of the Dirty War and dictatorship:

Esa tensión entre la memoria, de un lado, y el olvido y la muerte, del otro, sustenta la novela y la vincula con un conflicto real de la sociedad argentina.

Menos de dos años antes de aparecer *La ciudad ausente*, en diciembre de 1990, el presidente Carlos Saúl Menem había indultado a los principales responsables de la represión política en su país. Ese indulto era la culminación de un proceso
comenzado con el fin mismo de la dictadura: la instauración del perdón sobre la base del olvido, la idea de que la reconciliación nacional sólo sería posible si se extirpaba de la memoria el horror vivido, si se compartían las culpas y se diluían las responsabilidades. (141)

*La ciudad ausente* ilustra tanto los abusos de los años 70 y 80 como la forgetfulness institucional que siguió, aunque transformada en un mundo de ciencia ficción noir de ciborgos de relatos y hombres más metales que carne. Según J. Andrew Brown, una particular historia muestra una institución mental donde los doctores realizan cirugías invasivas “en una alusión con veladura a los violados de derechos humanos de la dictadura militar argentina más reciente” (“Life Signs” 89). Las referencias al control del estado de la información abundan, particularmente en la manera en que el gobierno intenta neutralizar y suprimir al sistema.

Varios personajes, especialmente Macedonio, y las diferentes Elenas —incluyendo la máquina, un paciente psiquiátrico, y una prostituta joven— que aparecen en diferentes guises a lo largo de la novela, están tratando de encontrar una manera de lidiar con sus propias memorias de tragedia, y lidiar con el peso de recordar tales eventos. Idelbar Avelar ve la manera en que la novela proporciona múltiples historias relacionadas y personajes como una forma de tomar su historia personal y la historia de Argentina e incorporarla en la memoria colectiva: “La tarea de la exhumación requiere sobre todo un gesto desubjetificante, un escape de la prisión de la palabra apropiada, una acción que finalmente desplaza la exhumación de los límites ecológicos hacia el mundo de la memoria colectiva” (135). La fluididad de las identidades de los personajes y las variaciones sobre varias temáticas clave sirven para ilustrar la naturaleza de todos los víctimas de la dictadura, así como la necesidad de recordar a los muertos y desaparecidos. A lo largo de la novela, el gobierno, siempre una presencia sombría, busca silenciar a los agentes de memoria, de diversas maneras.
from police harassment of Junior to numerous attempts to close down the museum where the machine is kept. As in “La memoria de Shakespeare,” memory is a definite burden, but one that the machine’s stories can make into a collective burden, rather than just a private hell. The raw elements of personal memory need to be converted into narratives if they are to live on, and the stories that populate La ciudad ausente seem to have a way of superseding the original memories, just as Shakespeare’s works become far more important to Soergel than any personal memories.

The nature of memory and its functions, particularly episodic memory, are illustrated in the evolution of the machine-woman. Endel Tulving provides this useful definition of episodic memory:

> It is oriented to the past, more vulnerable than other memory systems to neuronal dysfunction, and probably unique to humans. It makes possible mental time travel through subjective time—past, present, and future. This mental time travel allows one, as an ‘owner’ of episodic memory (‘self’), through the medium of autonoetic awareness, to remember one’s own possible future experiences. The operations of episodic memory require, but go beyond, the semantic memory system. [. . .] The essence of episodic memory lies in the conjunction of three concepts—self, autonoetic awareness, and subjective time. (“Episodic” 9)

This self-aware type of memory is combined with semantic memory, which stores facts and words, to create and recreate autobiographical stories—personal memories return encapsulated in episodes or stories, narrative in form. The initial machine, long before Elena is incorporated into it, simply takes the Edgar Allan Poe story “William Wilson” and modifies it, “hasta ser irreconocible,” into the story “William Williamson” (Ciudad 41). This transformation is purely
mechanical, but it establishes the function of the machine as a story alterer and the way certain
memories appear in different iterations and contexts throughout the novel. Once Elena is fused
with the machine, however, the stories begin to contain elements of episodic memory, including
increasing self-awareness and the presence of subjective time. The final sections of La ciudad
ausente appear to be the thoughts and memories of the machine-woman, who after narrating so
many stories from others is now finally telling her own version of history. Many of the
fragmentary stories that compose the novel show what seem to be autobiographical elements,
such as reflections of Elena’s death and the beginnings of her life as a cyborg, mixed with
inventions and distortions that can be reflections of the “neuronal dysfunction” that makes
episodic memory an uncertain and changing thing. The stories have a foundation on past events
and project into the future, but also display elements of the novel’s present, and each one seems
to reflect aspects of personal memory combined with aspects of la memoria ajena, or others’
memories, and fiction. Later, as the stories spread throughout the city, they create a new
collective memory that the readers can share, a memory that offers the mental time travel that
only episodic memory can offer and that only narrative form can make collective.

The museum that houses the machine reflects the human need to remember events in
episodic form. Rooms in the museum recreate and illustrate the events that the machine has
described in stories. The oldest stories are not from the machine, but from its creator, Macedonio
Fernández, and from his early attempts at creating a machine that can reword and transform
existing stories into new ones. To Macedonio, the machine “Le pareció un invento muy útil
porque los viejos que a la noche, en el campo, contaban historias de aparecidos se iban
muriendo” (42). The old gauchos are disappearing, so Macedonio hopes his machine can serve
the same function as narrator of stories, transmitting them from generation to generation. In fact,
one of the stories in the museum is an old gaucho tale, “El gaucho invisible,” evidence that “Macedonio siempre estaba recopilando historias ajenas” (46). This story about a gaucho who feels that no one else can see him is an illustration of how the stories in the museum give a voice to those whose stories would normally be forgotten or ignored. The museum is a place where memories of the past and the machine’s stories can retain their power in the face of forgetfulness, with photographs and reconstructions of the stories to make them real to the observer. Junior finds himself surprised by the reality of the stories when he first experiences the museum, and observes that the museum “Parecía un sueño. Pero los sueños eran relatos falsos. Y éstas eran historias verdaderas” (49). The first stories in the museum appear to be direct representations of the past, trustworthy memories corroborated by elements of external memory, such as photographs and carefully reproduced rooms. Two of the first stories Junior reads in the museum, “Una mujer” and “Primer amor,” deal with memory, pain, and loss; they are stories the machine has reproduced because they relate thematically with her own life that she still cannot remember completely.

With the next story, “La nena,” the machine begins to create narratives that recreate directly aspects of her own experience. The eponymous little girl, possibly autistic, has difficulty speaking with other people but feels that the electric fan and light bulbs can communicate with her. Her father, in an attempt to help her, begins to tell her variations of the same legend until she begins to retell it too. The girl, described as a “máquina triste,” begins to convert the repeated input of the story into the output of her own variation on the story: “A partir de ahí, con el repertorio de palabras que había aprendido y con la estructura circular de la historia, fue construyendo un lenguaje, una serie ininterrumpida de frases que le permitieron comunicarse con su padre” (57-58). This is a direct attempt by the machine to recreate her own origins. The girl,
associated from the beginning with machinery, becomes a storytelling machine, and in the end is able to use her mechanical repetitions to create a language and communicate with her father. Like the girl, the machine uses her stories to recreate details of her life, such as machine-like characters and the proliferation of stories, and to create her own personal language in order to externalize her painful memories. This story marks the beginning of true self-awareness for the machine, and with it clear evidence that Elena provides the machine with human episodic memory and all that it entails. These personal details serve as the point around which all of the other details of the stories rotate, the point at which Elena’s personal memory is reborn in her cyborg state.

About halfway through the novel, Junior receives an envelope from Fuyita, the museum’s night watchman, containing one of the machine’s latest stories, “Los nudos blancos.” Junior sees it as “Una historia explosiva, las ramificaciones paranoicas de la vida en la ciudad,” a story that worries the government (65). The story shares the experiences of a woman named Elena Fernández who is trapped in the Clinic, a mental hospital controlled by the government and the ominous Dr. Arana. Elena, who may be truly insane, believes she is part of a resistance group, and Dr. Arana is willing to torture and operate on the woman in order to extract information from her; the parallels with the abuses of the Dirty War are obvious. Elena experiences constant paranoia, pain, fear, and a complete lack of control over the situation in which she finds herself. The other people in the Clinic are witnesses of the government’s abuses; supposedly, they are there due to mental health issues, but it seems more likely that government wants to silence them. The Elena of “Los nudos blancos” is a double of Elena the machine, with echoes of her love for a man named Mac(edonio) and her constant suspicion that she is truly a machine:
Estaba segura de haber muerto y de que alguien había incorporado su cerebro (a veces decía su alma) a una máquina. Se sentía aislada en una sala blanca llena de cables y de tubos. No era una pesadilla; era la certidumbre de que el hombre que la amaba la había rescatado de la muerte y la había incorporado a un aparato que transmitía sus pensamientos. Era eterna y era desdichada. (No hay una cosa sin la otra). (67)

This passage presents what is perhaps the most direct connection between the general plot of La ciudad ausente and the story “Los nudos blancos.” The two Elenas represent the union of human being and machine, and both women feel the pressing need to tell their stories even if telling such stories is a painful process. In both cases, the government wants to “deactivate” these women because their storytelling is subversive and directly undermines imposed forgetfulness; if these two have committed a crime, it is that of remembering and bearing testimony of the past. The machine uses this story not only as a way to face institutional torture, but also to process and understand her own origins. Later, when Junior meets the German scientist that helped Macedonio Fernández create the machine, he finds her story contains several elements he first finds in “Los nudos blancos,” such as a white clinic—in this case a hospital—and a man—Macedonio or Mac—that cannot bring himself to enter the clinic and visit the woman he loves. Other elements bring to mind “La nena,” such as the references to electric fans in both the clinic and the little girl’s bedroom, thereby creating connections between the stories of the machine as well as what Junior finds in his investigations. In a novel full of doubles, variations, and insanity, it is hard to tell exactly who is creating which stories, but the similarities and connections provide the links needed to navigate the varied narratives.
Through these connections and allusions, “Los nudos blancos” serves as the key to understanding the rest of the novel and the role memory plays in it. Like the museum, which is connected to the city by a series of underground tunnels, the story provides the central concepts needed to connect all of the fragments of La ciudad ausente. Brown notes the central importance of this story as well as its implications on the overall plot: “The story functions as both a microcosm for the rest of the novel, as well as a possible alternate explanation for the Elena-machine that Junior finds in the museum. If the machine Elena is not the narrator, the patient Elena may well be, a possibility that is never ruled out” (“Life signs” 89). In other words, apart from reflecting the Elena-machine’s creation, the story could reflect the creation of the novel’s narrative. The story offers one metaphor in particular, one that is central in understanding the way memory functions for these characters: los nudos blancos. When Dr. Arana is about to extract information directly from Elena’s brain in an invasive procedure, he explains to his victim, in a way not unlike the villains of countless movies, what he is about to do:

–Hay que actuar sobre la memoria –dijo Arana–. Existen zonas de condensación, nudos blancos, es posible desatarlos, abrirlos. Son como mitos –dijo–, definen la gramática de la experiencia. Todo lo que los lingüistas nos han enseñado sobre el lenguaje está también en el corazón de la materia viviente. El código genético y el código verbal presentan las mismas características. A eso lo llamamos los nudos blancos. Los neurólogos de la Clínica pueden intentar la intervención, habrá que actuar sobre el cerebro.

Iban a operarla. Se sentía lenta y vacía, temió que la hubieran desactivado. (71)

Arana knows how to find the central points of memory within the brain, the basic unit of memory that, like the genetic code or semantic sign, allows him to decode the brain. In this case,
the source of memories resides in dense knots, difficult to untie, the same knots that cause Elena
the patient’s hallucinations and serve as the raw material of Elena the machine’s stories. Much
like the father’s repeated story in “La nena,” the *nudos blancos* of memory are the constants that
are continually reworked into the memories and stories of the novel’s characters. In this way,
Macedonio, the Clinic, mechanical women, islands, and German physicists all serve as *nudos
blancos* in the Elena machine’s mind, and therefore in the stories she tells.

Several critics have noted the importance of these *nudos blancos*. María Antonieta
Pereira compares these central points to the narrative nucleus of internet hypertext, the fixed
points that can be rearranged and reappropriated into new texts or rearrangements of texts:

> Considerando los atributos de un hipertexto, podemos decir que *La ciudad ausente*, por sí

sola, ya configura esa escritura en red a medida que se estructura por medio de varios

núcleos narrativos, muchos de los cuales son los micro-relatos de la máquina. El

funcionamiento de tales núcleos se torna semejante al de los ‘centros móviles’ del

hipertexto por varias razones, además de su carácter heterogéneo y metamórfico. Un

núcleo narrativo, como su propio nombre lo indica, tiene como principal atributo la

posibilidad de desdoblarle en otra historia o nueva red, cuya deflagración depende de un

lector-narrador. (46).

Brown also compares these points to hypertext, noting that Junior becomes central to this
concept of the (hyper)text: “Junior becomes a kind of hypertextual reader: he is told the stories
by a truly cyborg narrator, even as he participates as a kind of writer/reader (or ‘wreader’ as
some hypertext theorists would have it), moving from story to story and making connections
between his physical location (the museum) and the stories he encounters” (“Life Signs” 94).
He also expands the concept of *nudos blancos* to include references to external media and
literature, stating that “Piglia thus creates an active visual and auditory space in which his nudos blancos (necessarily verbal) move in and out of relation to other media, connect and then move on to other signifying contexts” (“Cyborgs” 322). In his view, the nudos are verbal because of their relation with language and the role of literary allusions in the novel. This is a useful way of seeing the interaction between text and reader in a book as fragmentary as this, and allows one to see how the different characters are both creators of the text and partakers of it. Like hypertext, the importance concept is the connections, the network, that the nudos blancos create, and the way that provide Junior and the reader with certain navigable points amid the chaos. They may not be enough to create a sure construction of the plot or to determine what, if anything is real, but they are enough to create a construction that incorporates the truly important points.

These nudos blancos have another parallel in the science of memory, one which helps to illuminate the nature of the machine’s stories in the context of Elena’s memories: the memory trace, the chemical change within the brain that neurologists seek in order to understand exactly how memories are created and stored. Like much of the brain’s function, the specifics of the memory trace remain shrouded in mystery, but the trace serves as the permanent record within the brain, the nudo blanco that is reopened and recreated during the process of remembering.

The memory trace is not just mere residue, or the after-effect of a past experience, not just mere residue of a past experience, not just an incomplete record of what was. It is also a recipe, or a prescription, for the future. However, as it is usually only an impoverished record, it is also an unreliable guide to what will happen in the future. What actually happens—what kind of a future experience it enables—depends not only on its properties at the time of attempted retrieval but also on the conditions prevailing at the time of retrieval. (“Coding” 67)
Seeing these core experiences, these *nudos blancos*, in this light explains why the stories not only contain elements of Elena’s past, but also her present in the museum, seen in the repetition of motifs like connective cables, fans, storytelling, and rebellion against state control. These elements of the present change memories of the past, as memory is a (re)constructive process, one that calls up the memory trace’s key elements and fills in the gaps, but the past also shows up in the present of the stories. This is why “Los nudos blancos,” which seems to occur in or just prior to the novel’s present, contains allusions to Elena the machine’s creation. Even the machine’s insecurities about her present state and her attempts to recover autonomous memory appear in the words of Elena in the Clinic: “–Antes era inteligente –dijo Elena–. Ahora soy máquina de repetir relatos” (71). Past and present feed into each other in the malleable world of the machine’s stories, just as they do every time the human mind brings a memory back to life.

The machine’s varied stories also reflect the narrative nature of episodic memory. Unlike semantic memory, which can recall facts such as the length of a year independent of the events surrounding the learning of such knowledge, episodic memory involves recalling and mentally reliving an event, with actions, characters—if only the rememberer—, and subjective time. Robert C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson posit that storytelling is central to human memory, making these three basic arguments:

1. Virtually all human knowledge is based on stories constructed around past experiences,
2. New experiences are interpreted in terms of old stories,
3. The content of story memories depends on whether and how they are told to others, and these reconstituted memories form the basis of the individual’s remembered self. (1)
They go on to explain how these old stories, or older memories, affect the interpretation of present stories and experiences:

Different people understand the same story differently precisely because the stories they already know are different. When they hear new stories, understanders try to construe these stories as old stories they have heard before. [. . .] The real problem in understanding, then, is identifying which of all the stories you already know is the one being told to you yet again. (17)

In this way, Elena the machine takes her story and maps it onto others, making her most important memories the basis of all the others. She takes in history and stories, relates it to her own experience, and then creates new ones. Los nudos blancos are the stories by which she judges all others, the personal experiences so ingrained that she cannot understand other stories or tell new ones without relating everything to these deeply-rooted points. Every reader and writer brings a preexisting set of stories, of narrative memories, to the text, and in La ciudad ausente, Elena takes elements of the past and the present to create new stories, some of which project into the future.

The story “La isla” uses these nudos blancos to imagine a distant future where a culture’s language changes unexpectedly at random times and the society’s canonical text is James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake. Seen within the network of stories in the novel, this story provides a vision of a future free of state tyranny because it is a future free of the language of the state. Due to the random, yet collective, changes in the language of the island, its inhabitants are also outside of historical time, for all that they write soon becomes incomprehensible. Ana, a woman who knows of the Elena-machine’s origins, gives this story to Junior, explaining that “Yo le voy a hacer ver ese lugar donde los nudos blancos se han abierto, es una isla, en el brazo del río,
poblada de ingleses y de irlandeses y de rusos y de gente que ha llegado de todas partes, perseguidas por las autoridades, amenazados de muerte, exiliados políticos” (116-17). Here, the nudos blancos have opened, and Elena’s memories and experiences become an imaginative future where the authorities have lost their power over language. This is a place where the traumatic past can no longer haunt or control, but it is also a place without a collective memory. It seems the people have almost escaped the growing burden of memory, but there are still oral traditions passed down about the time of the island’s foundation, including one about a solitary, exiled man who teaches a mechanical woman to speak using tape recordings. The man commits suicide, however, and leaves the woman on the shore, forever awaiting his return, an image that Elena uses again in her direct narration in the final pages of the novel. This story shows how episodic memory can draw on the past to create visions of the future, providing not only the ability to relive the past, but also possible futures, bringing to mind Schacter and Addis’s assertion that constructive memory “can draw on the elements and gist of the past, and extract, recombine and reassemble them into imaginary elements that never occurred in that exact form” (445). Episodic memory is the key to Elena’s creativity, providing her with the nudos blancos that serve as the bricks from which she builds her stories.

Just as Arana describes them, the nudos blancos are like circular myths that appear time and again in unexpected places. These central truths are dangerous to the government because they lead to the creation of countless variations on memories that expose the truth about those the state would rather have forgotten. Junior, whose detective work brings most of the stories to the reader, begins to discover these connections and how they relate to the machine:

Revisó otra vez toda la serie de relatos. Había un mensaje implícito que enlazaba las historias, un mensaje que se repetía. Había una fábrica, una isla, un físico
Elena not only uses her own history, but begins to incorporate truths from outside, *memorias ajenas*, from the disappeared and the silent. These stories are the new myths of a paranoid society, which, when taken together, create a hidden map that can lead the persistent investigator to roots of the truth. Once the *nudos blancos* are discovered, even historical facts can be rewritten, even if the process of rewriting reflects the uncertainty and constant modifications inherent in memory. Elena, in her eternal state as narrating machine, writes her own memory, bringing in outside events in order to express herself and placing them into new narrative contexts in order to create a new vocabulary. In turn, these stories can then pass through the city, spreading through unofficial and underground channels, and can influence the present. Once again, the nature of memory packaged in episodic form, allows for past, present, and future to influence each other.

One interesting element of the *nudos blancos* is their physical nature; in this they are different from the memory traces that neurologists seek. Tulving explains that the “Memory trace is a change, and change is not an entity. It is a relationship (difference) between two things that are physical objects, the brain at time 1 (‘immediately before’ the experience) and time 2 (‘immediately after’ the experience), but the relationship itself is not a physical object” (“Coding” 67). The *nudos blancos*, on the other hand, are “la material viva donde se han grabado
las palabras” (*Ciudad* 116). Grete Muëller, a photographer in “Los nudos blancos,” looks for the source of the *nudos* in the marks on the backs of turtle shells; she explains that “Los nudos blancos habían sido, en el origen, marcas en los huesos” (80). Therefore, in the world of *La ciudad ausente*, even if memory is a slippery, changeable thing, there are fixed points that cannot be erased, basic truths that can be found in humans, animals, and even music. Macedonio says that the *nudos blancos* “siguen vivos mientras la carne se disgrega. Grabadas en los huesos del cráneo, las formas invisibles del lenguaje del amor siguen vivas” (154). In spite of death, torture, and pain, there is something physical and tangible that obligates one to remember, a primordial language that records and fossilizes the truly important things in life. For Macedonio and Elena, the memory of their love is the *nudo blanco* on which all of their actions depend, the essential memory they will never be able to forget, for it is somehow written in their bones.

The presence of cyborg bodies supports the physical nature of these memories. Throughout the novel, there are several characters that show, physically or metaphorically, mechanical traits, from “La nena” to Rajzarov, a man whose body is more metal than flesh after being torn apart by a bomb. The presence of metal body parts is an external marker of a past trauma, a type of *nudo blanco* exposed to the world. Brown notes that “The cyborg is the traumatized storyteller, whose remembered and remembering body recalls the trauma and horror of dictatorship and state-sponsored terror in the face of national attempts to forget the past” (“Life Signs” 102). For Piglia, the memory of trauma should not merely be a neuronal change, but rather a physical mark that stays with the body throughout life and beyond. Elena’s body, a blend of woman and machine, is on exhibit in the museum for all to see, a constant reminder of her death and the pain it caused Macedonio. The situation is inverted, however, in Elena’s stories, which she has to use to make him present as she waits forever on the shore for his return.
The machine creates her own memory, but she does not simply keep it in her mind. The stories, including plagiarized versions, are published throughout the city, reaching the people and disconcerting the state. In this way, the machine’s stories are able to transmit her memory to others, just as she has incorporated others’ experiences into her stories. Junior becomes increasingly wrapped up in the world of the stories, to the point that he imagines, when he arrives at Ana’s house, that “jamás iba a salir de ese lugar y que se perdería en el relato de la mujer” (113). Effectively, this is how events unfold. When he arrives at the island and speaks with Russo, the scientist claims that personal memories and experiences are replicas, reproductions of the machine’s memoria ajena. Russo explains that the events that lead Junior to the island were planned and prepared by Elena: “ella produce historias, indefinidamente, relatos convertidos en recuerdos invisibles que todos piensan que son propios, ésas son replicas. [. . .] No hace falta que usted se vaya de la isla, esta historia puede terminar aquí” (154-55). From this point on, Junior disappears from the novel, and the machine speaks directly. He arrives at the nudos blancos, the source of what he seeks, and dissolves into the collective memory of the stories, leaving only Elena and her eternal narration. Junior’s absorption into the stories suggests the possibility that his story is, from the beginning, created by the machine, that she creates him as a way to explore her own origins. Her stories have real power because they can envelop the reader in different realities, bringing to light truths from the past and present that could be otherwise ignored and creating new memorias ajenas in the reader’s mind. Keith Oatley, while noting that modern psychologists often ignore fiction because it does not employ the same empirical method, argues that it has emotional and cognitive value:

But fiction is not empirical truth. It is simulation that runs on the minds of readers just as computer simulations run on computers. In any simulation, coherence
truths have priority over correspondences. Moreover, in the simulations of fictions, personal truths can be explored that allow readers to experience emotions—their own emotions—and understand aspects of them that are obscure, in relation to contexts in which the emotions arise. (101)

Indeed, the stories become simulations in the reader’s mind, brought to life using both the text and the reader’s memories, allowing them to become representations in the mind on the same level as a personal memory. In this way, the pain of the past is not just a fact recalled from semantic memory, but becomes episodic and personal, with real emotional impact. William James characterizes this process as appropriation of an event: “Memory requires more than mere dating of a fact in the past. It must be dated in my past. In other words, I must think that I directly experienced its occurrence. It must have that ‘warmth and intimacy’[. . .], as characterizing all experiences ‘appropriated’ by the speaker as his own” [emphasis in original] (650). The story, the photograph, and the recording are some of the technologies man can use to create that direct presence of a past or imagined event needed to make the other’s experience have the impact of personal remembrance.

In this way, the readers of the machine’s stories receive personal information from the past mixed with pieces of the present and elements of imagination, all in a way that allows them to feel the pain and paranoia of the characters, to simulate or appropriate their experiences in their minds. Junior takes this process to the extreme, losing himself in the story, as do the spies of “Los nudos blancos” who “están adiestrados para negar su identidad y usar una memoria ajena” (75). Piglia, in his essay on “La memoria de Shakespeare,” discusses the role of memoria ajena in modern narrative:
La metáfora borgeana de la memoria ajena, con su insistencia en la claridad de los recuerdos artificiales, está en el centro de la narrativa contemporánea. En la obra de Burroughs, de Pynchon, de Gibson, de Philip Dick, asistimos a la destrucción del recuerdo personal. O mejor, a la sustitución de la memoria propia por una cadena de secuencias y de recuerdos extraños. Narrativamente podríamos hablar de la muerte de Proust, en el sentido de la muerte de la memoria como condición de la temporalidad personal y la identidad verdadera. (“Shakespeare”)

Obviously, Piglia could include his own name in this list of authors that subvert notions of stable personal memory. The machine’s fight is not only to remember the facts of her own life, it is to transmit them, make them external and allow others to appropriate them, just as she has appropriated the trauma of the Dirty War. Junior experiences this “destrucción del recuerdo personal,” and the novel invites others to do the same. Just as reality influences the stories, the stories in turn reprogram reality by influences memory. *Los nudos blancos* are the only stable points, written in bone, and all the rest—personal identity, historical facts—can vary without losing the essence. *Memoria ajena* is, in this case, collective memory, and the machine is the producer and guardian of these fictions that can cause the reader to understand and remember experiences that others have had.

In post dictatorial Argentina, state abuse is one of the memories that these stories must preserve, as noted above. Like the cyborg body, the tortured body carries physical reminders of what has happened, and stories like “Los nudos blancos” further illustrate the moment of violation of the body. In a society trying to bury this past, Elena dares to remember and to lament the past through her stories. Her stories bring to mind Macedonio’s collection of gaucho stories about *aparecidos*, for Elena’s stories make the ghosts of the past appear for the reader; in the
gauchos no longer give a voice to the disappeared, the machine must do it. Just as Dr. Arana and his colleagues want to deactivate Elena the patient by neutralizing her *nudos blancos*, the government wishes to disconnect Elena the machine and prevent the transmission of her witness to what has occurred. The state attempts to close the museum in order to stem the flow of stories that, once in the city, have the ability to spread outside of its control; these stories are so dangerous precisely because they can create new *memorias ajenas*, and allow those who were not present at the original scene of the trauma to remember and feel the event as if they were there. The anonymous ghosts of the past live on in these stories which refuse to let them stay buried. Avelar notes that this kind of subversion is a way of fighting fire with fire: “If the state invents false names, if it places its victims into alien, third-person memories, making them look at history through the eyes of another, the only alternative is to manufacture anonymity, to multiply eyes and names as so many impersonal war machines” (134). The official story wants to make the disappeared anonymous in their absence, but Elena’s stories make them present in their anonymous multiplicity, allowing anyone to feel like one of them. The characters lost in their shifting identities subvert the imposed identity of the state and with it the command to forget. And, even though the *nudos blancos* serve as fixed points, the stories show that there is freedom in the act of remembering and the way that it can rewrite past, present, and future. Fornet sees this reinterpretation as central to the role of memory in *La ciudad ausente*:

> El tema principal de la novela es, sin lugar a dudas, la memoria: memoria de la esposa muerta, memoria de relatos ajenos, memoria de los hechos que el Estado quisiera hacer olvidar. Pero la memoria no es siempre recuerdo de lo ocurrido; puede ser también una memoria impostada que reconstruya un pasado inexistente.
A fin de cuentas, como la historia, no es la reconstrucción de los hechos, sino la reinterpretación que hacemos de ellos. (156)

The main difference, then, is that Elena’s reinterpretation of events is centered on remembering and mourning, whereas the government wants to cover the past and erase even the nudos blancos that bear testimony of its abuses. Memory is, to a degree, what one makes of it, and the machine is trying to use its memory to create a world that is, like “La isla,” free of such state controls.

With its central metaphor of the nudos blancos of memory, La ciudad ausente not only describes the nature of remembering—it exemplifies it in its structure and plot. Brown interprets this structure as a reflection of the cyborg body: “The novel itself appears as a kind of mechanism akin to the cyborgs that inhabit it, a network of stories, intertextual references and mirrored events and images that exists not in a single textual ‘body’ but in the relationships between the different narrative lines” (“Life signs” 89). This cyborg body is, in turn, a way of expressing the nature of the nudos blancos and the physical reminders of the past that relate to memory. The fragmentation and incertitude of the novel may make Junior a poor detective in the tradition sense, but the truth is that he finds what he is seeking and more; he finds the origins and the form of memory and then unites with that collective memory. In a somewhat paradoxical process, one must emphasize memory while deemphasizing the purely personal aspects of it, emphasizing instead the power of a literary memory that embraces everything. The machine, according to Filer, is in this way a Borgesian Aleph, eternal and infinite: “Al identificar el funcionamiento de la máquina con la producción de la visión totalizadora del Aleph, Piglia hace de la máquina la depositaria de la memoria colectiva y el agente de la búsqueda humana de sentido” (133). Facing personal loss, the characters of the novel become readers and writer, seeing their pain in the pain of others and finding a type of purpose in life. A memory stays
hidden within the *nudos blancos* or present in the marked body, but a story can make the same memory as eternal as Elena.

It seems fitting to return to Piglia’s statement that “Recordar con una memoria extraña es una variante del tema del doble pero es también una metáfora perfecta de la experiencia literaria. La lectura es el arte de construir una memoria personal a partir de experiencias y recuerdos ajenos. Las escenas de los libros leídos vuelven como recuerdos privados” (“Shakespeare”). With *La ciudad ausente*, Piglia has created a novel that reaffirms this connection between literature and memory, not only in content but also in form. A map of this absent city would be a map of memory itself, full of intricate variations but still able to conserve what is truly essential and transmit it. This reflection of episodic memory does not look only to the past, as the last pages serve as an invitation to hope, to look to the future in the face of so much past trauma. “Nadie se acerca, nadie viene,” Elena says, “pero voy a seguir, enfrente está el desierto, el sol calcina las piedras, me arrastro a veces, pero voy a seguir” (168). Surrounded by tragedy and solitude, Elena makes use of her state as machine to reproduce the literature that can create a new memory in the mind of the reader, but like Junior the reader needs to lose himself, to a degree, in this collective memory in order to absorb these *nudos blancos* and have them return as private memories.
We are all susceptible to the pull of viral ideas. Like mass hysteria. Or a tune that gets into your head that you keep on humming all day until you spread it to someone else. Jokes. Urban legends. Crackpot religions. Marxism. No matter how smart we get, there is always this deep irrational part that makes us potential hosts for self-replicating information. (399-400)

Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*
The first section of Rodrigo Fresán’s *Mantra* begins with two epigraphs about Mexico City: the first comes from Hernán Cortés’s *Cartas de Relación*, but the second is from *Radio Free Albemuth*, a Philip K. Dick novel. Before *Mantra* even begins the narrative, these epigraphs present the reader with the juxtaposition of historical eyewitness accounts and modern science fiction, placed side by side without concern for whether the quotes come from high or popular culture. This contrast is a sign of things to come, as the novel itself is a type of mash-up or cut-up—an idea Fresán borrows from William Burroughs—that takes items from far-ranging and disparate sources, because “México D.F. es la más cut-up de todas las ciudades del mundo” (*Mantra* 229). The three narrators are foreigners in one way or another, bringing their external ideas of Mexico City to what they see and say, adding to the polyphonic mix of media, culture, and history. J. Andrew Brown sees this new tendency to mix current culture with high literature as the Baroque tendency of cyberpunk, “in which narrative springs from the interplay of popular and elite culture,” and where texts “spring from the intersection of film, contemporary music, television, and graphic novels” (“Cyborgs” 324). He includes Fresán alongside Ricardo Piglia and Alberto Fuguet as examples of Latin American authors that employ this aesthetic even when writing outside of the science fiction genre. *Mantra* takes this stylistic use of varied references, from *The Twilight Zone* and Godzilla movies to Beat poetry and *Pedro Páramo*, to a fragmented extreme, offering the reader a kaleidoscopic view of a D.F. that exists through, and because of, all of the media and literature that pass through it. Mario Lillo P. likens this effect to the Borgesian Aleph:

> Es tal la riqueza de esferas de la realidad convocadas por la novela que el lector se siente a veces transportado a un Aleph literario, en el cual se despliegan autores, textos, expresiones musicales, géneros y subgéneros literarios y diversas
manifestaciones de los medios de comunicación de masas, de la historia, de la mitología y de la cultura popular. (11)

The novel acts, in this way, as a kind of cultural Aleph, a point where countless strands of media and literature converge, allowing the reader to see the different strata of cultural production and their consumption by the characters.

This “cut-up” use of parody and pastiche can easily be misinterpreted as the usual postmodern ironic smirk, devoid of meaning or substance. However, the wealth of allusions serves as the key to understanding the role memory plays in the novel, as well as the nature of those memories. The novel’s characters, including the eponymous Martín Mantra, live in the modern world, with its constant barrage of information through print, music, film, and television, and must process the fragmentary information they receive in order to place themselves in their world: México D.F., presented in the novel as a key center of transmitted information both past and present. Fictional narrative most often takes the guise of a character bringing up memories in order to share them, and the traditional way of telling these memories is chronological. In Mantra, however, the majority of the text is offered in short, disordered (or differently ordered) fragments that the reader must reassemble in an attempt to recreate a timeline. In this, and other recent novels, Fresán uses the nature of memory—once more a shifting, unreliable narrative that is nevertheless important to human function and identity—as a structural element of the text.

Emilse Beatriz Hidalgo, analyzing the body of Fresán’s work, notes that “In the later books such as Mantra and Jardines de Kensington, the concern is less with those specific remnants of Argentine history and more with writing and the themes of memory and death in general” (5). Indeed, memory plays a central role at all points of the novel, and these memories are often attached to the multitude of television shows, films, and literary works that the characters have
consumed. Edmundo Paz Soldán describes *Mantra* as a novel of “la multiplicidad de información” and as “un texto modélico para la literatura latinoamericana, pues se anima a explorar qué es lo que le ocurre a la psiquis del individuo, y al género novelístico, cuando estos son sometidos a una descarga múltiple y continua de información a través de medios como el cine, las revistas y, por supuesto, la televisión” (108). Fresán’s novel tells a story of fragmented memories enmeshed with an endless stream of fragmented media in such a way that one cannot exist without the other. In *Mantra*, memory is inextricable from media and the technologies that produce and frame it, creating a quixotic yet postmodern reflection of contemporary popular society not only in Mexico City, but everywhere that can be described as media-saturated.

From its first pages, Mantra establishes both the importance of personal memory as well as that of technological methods for storing information. The nameless narrator of the first section of the novel, titled “Antes: El amigo mexicano,” has just arrived at the Mexico City airport for the first time. Many years earlier, as a child in his home country which no longer exists, he met and befriended a strange boy, Martín Mantra, who became the beginning of a lifelong obsession with Mexico. His prize possession is a photograph of his class at school, a black and white image whose lack of color the narrator compares to films and television like *Touch of Evil, The Third Man,* and *The Twilight Zone.* The narrator sees the picture as capturing a ghostly essence of the past: “Una foto de un grupo de fantasmas—porque cuando somos bajos y flamantes no somos otra cosa que fantasmas de nosotros mismos—donde el espectro más auténtico y verificable de todos es la ausencia de Martín Mantra” (27). Interestingly, this photo is important because of what is missing from it, that which only personal memory can fill in. A photograph is a way of externalizing a memory, of creating an image that can store a moment, but this man finds the photo important because of what he needs to remember through absence.
An image that would normally be used to remember a moment is used here to remember everything about Martín, the boy missing from the image. The man explains that he takes the picture everywhere he goes, like a sacred relic, “porque necesito verla todos los días para saber de dónde vengo, cuál es y dónde está el planeta del que partí tantos años atrás y al que daría cualquier cosa por volver” (29). The narrator has imbued the photo with the essence of his childhood memories, which revolve around Martín Mantra; he cannot even remember many of the other children’s names. It is clear from this early example that the relationship between technology and memory is complex; technology is not a mere supplement to add to memory or make it more accurate, because what technology cannot capture and store can be more important than what it can, even when the technology still serves as a stimulus for reviving these personal memories.

The narrator’s memories of Martín Mantra, the son of Mexican telenovela stars, are full of media experiences, most of them involving television and film. The boys’ favorite show is *Dimensión desconocida—The Twilight Zone*—but the show does not air on a set schedule, instead appearing on their television at random. The show, which is itself a series of independent half-hour sketches that do not connect into a single narrative, has one constant from episode to episode: Rod Serling, the show’s host and creator, who gives a brief introduction and some closing remarks. The young Martín Mantra explains Serling’s importance not only to the show but to his life, claiming that

Todos buscamos a alguien hábilmente rodserlingforme que nos narre y ordene nuestras existencias. Rod Serling es el profeta ideal para nuestras vidas [. . .]. Rod Serling como apóstol escritor y productor de nuestras vidas en el horario central
Martín Mantra’s search for a narrator, someone who can order the scattered elements of reality, shows how television has shaped his thoughts. One day, the boys see a lost episode of *The Twilight Zone* where a young Robert Redford finds himself transported to pre-Colombian Mexico, where he is received as the god Quetzalcoatl, an image that will be recreated much later in the novel when Martín makes himself into the new god Mantrax (it is later suggested that Martín may have directed this “lost” episode). Interestingly, the show that he chooses to use as a structuring concept for life is aired at random and consists of episodes that are connected only by certain thematic ideas, not by chronology or narrative threads. In a similar way, the pieces of Mantra’s life that appear in the novel come in small episodes, all shared by others at seemingly random times, but fitting into the overall narrative thematically. The novel does not have a plot in the traditional sense; rather, it has episodes from various lives that connect, in some way, to Martín Mantra’s life. Without narrating at any point, Martín fills the role of Rod Serling for the novel, serving as the connection between the different narrators and their memories. Alexis Candia explains that, despite Mantra’s shifting identities throughout the novel, he remains the connection between the fragments of experiences and stories that appear throughout:

Martín Mantra (a.k.a.) El Mantra (a.k.a.) Capitán Godzilla (a.k.a.) Mantrax es, a todas luces, la piedra que con mayor frecuencia se repite en el mosaico conocido como *Mantra* y, por cierto, se erige como el motor que impulsa el desarrollo de la historia. Así, es dable apreciar el paso de niño genio a cineasta, luchador enmascarado, guerrillero milenarista y nuevo Mesías. (“Resplandor”)
With his goal of becoming Rod Serling, he connects the elements of the story through the episodic appearances he makes, from the boy playing and watching films with the first narrator to the new self-created god programming the robot that narrates the final act, without using some kind of ordering narration. Martín Mantra exists only as a memory told by others, a memory that mirrors the unpredictable nature of an old television show.

The presence of *The Twilight Zone* is significant not only for its structural connections with *Mantra*, but for its many thematic connections. For the first two narrators, science fiction is a kind of cultural currency, a set of images and ideas that allow them to relate to their ever-stranger present and the memories that haunt them. For Martín Mantra, these ideas become more; he puts them into practice in his acts as revolutionary terrorist Capitán Godzilla and self-made god Mantrax, culminating in the destruction of Mexico City and the creation of the cyborg mummy that narrates the final portion of the novel. The strange, shifting world of the novel is a place where reality and fiction do not need to be mutually exclusive, where life spends as much time imitating art as it can. Rod Serling’s *Twilight Zone* is just that kind of place, where distinctions between seemingly universal norms, such as truth and fiction or right and wrong, are constantly challenged and erased. In M. Keith Booker’s *Strange TV*, he uses the program as his first example of strange, boundary-pushing television that moves into the realm of the postmodern:

*The Twilight Zone*’s interrogation of the boundary between normal and abnormal is part of a larger project of deconstruction of conventional polar oppositions, the very name of the series indicating a realm in which the normal distinction between opposites, such as darkness and light, has been blurred, recalling a
similar blurring in the Bakhtininan carnival. It is in this consistent program of
deconstruction that the series is at its most postmodern. (62)

Mantra continues the deconstructive process that The Twilight Zone presents, employing not
only its episodic nature, but also its constant metafictional twists and use of media both real and
imagined, to create its own kind of Dimensión desconocida, a twilight world where it does not
matter if one’s memories come from personal experience or the television screen. More often
than not, these memories are formed while consuming and discussing media, placing them in a
strange relationship with reality from the beginning, because so much of the characters’
“personal” memories come from shared experiences watching fiction.

Other memories of Martín further show the effects of profound media saturation. For
example, the narrator recalls Mantra’s idea that Godzilla was a Mexican monster, reflected later
in his nom de guerre “Capitán Godzilla.” The film 2001: A Space Odyssey, with Mantra’s
running commentary, proves to be thematically important as well; Martín later wants to play a
game where he is the monolith and the narrator is HAL 9000, both of which become prophetic
roles. Furthermore, Martín claims that Kubrick planned a version of the film where the Star-
Child destroys the earth with a ring of nuclear bombs. The presence of an alternate ending, as
well as the lost episode of The Twilight Zone, show how, in the world of the novel, nonexistent
media products can be just as important those that are well-known, just as what is missing from a
photo can be what gives it life. However, Martín’s proposed alternate ending seems at odds with
general interpretations of the end of 2001; for example, Hans Feldmann believes it is an
optimistic film: “The basic argument of the ‘Space Odyssey’ is that mankind will survive the
impending collapse of Western civilization. The film ends with an affirmation of life, an
affirmation of the adventurous human spirit” (12-13). To Martín, this image of rebirth is
incomplete without some kind of destruction, and, to a child of the latter 20th century with a head full of science fiction, what better mode of bringing about the end than nuclear holocaust? Mantra, having received a constant stream of variations on similar themes—such as the end of civilization—from film, feels even at a young age that he can propose different endings that alter the entire feel and meaning of a work. In a world where countless narrative threads can float unconnected like so many episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, the viewer becomes a site for all of these narratives to converge and change before retransmission. The narrator is unable to remember *2001* independent of Mantra and his commentary, intertwining his personal memories with not only the film, but his friend’s reinterpretation of it. These connections serve a role similar to *La ciudad ausente’s nudos blancos*, the sole fixed points amid an ever fragmentary chaos of stories and references.

Perhaps the most symptomatic expression of media-saturation is the film *El cumpleaños de Martín Mantra / Nueve años*. The film lasts 24 hours, the length of the birthday party depicted, and includes the countless members of the Mantra family with their eccentricities. But what begins as a home video soon turns into something more, with many scenes of El Cielito Lindo, the Mantra family’s Xanadu, being filmed in a replica that “acabó superando el original” (82). Orson Welles is hired to film the opening shot of the estate, which become a copy of the opening scene of *Citizen Kane*. The film then becomes a series of poems, including one titled “Godzilla en México,” and the imagery moves from the Mantra family to images of toy dinosaurs and Aztec calendars. Just as in the narrator’s photograph, Martín never appears on screen, becoming an absent presence that pervades the film, which becomes the beginning of Martín’s later plan to create *Mundo Mantra*, a show about the family filmed by a camera that he wears on his head at all times. A kind of precursor to the modern reality show, *Mundo Mantra* is
the way for Martín to create a permanent technological record—an external memory—of his life and transmit it to others—the viewers. Bombarded by media, Mantra chooses to add to the sea of television images rather than simply ingest them, another element of his later quest to deify himself. The same child who worships Kubrick and Serling becomes a strange auteur of his own, whether his work be a show filmed with a head-mounted camera or the cleansing destruction of Mexico City.

The narrator of this first portion of the novel spends his time remembering Martín Mantra because it is his only memory. This is due to a brain tumor, which the narrator calls his “Sea Monkey” (53), that spreads and makes one memory from his childhood overwrite everything else. Because they are connected to his friend, the films and TV shows he watched as a child remain part of his mind even when the faces of everyone else in his life are fading. A cassette of his meeting with the doctor who gives him the news finds the narrator randomly speaking of seemingly unrelated events and words like a machine spouting random information as it breaks down, until he begins to say “Dave… My mind is going…I can feel it… I can feel it… My mind is going… There is no question about it…” (105). Just as Martín Mantra had told him in the game they played many years earlier, the narrator becomes HAL 9000, citing word-for-word the computer’s dying words. Martín Mantra proves to be a prophetic figure, predicting in a childhood game the way a film will attach itself to the narrator’s memories and stay with them until, in a moment of deep personal loss, it becomes one of the few things he can remember.

These memories of Mantra are monolithic, overshadowing everything, yet they are fragmented and head in multiple directions, connected to various television and film references; their only connecting point is the strange Mexican millionaire: “Todos los otros nombres famosos, todos los célebres acontecimientos existen ahora nada más para ocupar un mínimo espacio, una breve
nota a los pies de Martín Mantra... Todo se... mantrifica” (105). The boy who was the narrator’s portal to a world of media becomes his portal to remembering such media when all else fades away. In this way, it is fitting that the narrator lands in Mexico City on el Día de los Muertos, burns a photograph of himself, and then commits suicide. His trip to the D.F. serves as a pilgrimage of memory, heading to the home of the boy who dominates his thoughts, and having reached the point where he feels pure due to only having one memory: “Mi alma ha alcanzado una pureza indivisible porque está hecha de un solo recuerdo. El hecho de que ese recuerdo sea un cuadro gigantesco y complejo, un mural terrible y amplificado a partir de lo que en realidad pudo haber sido un boceto mínimo y a mano alzada, no me preocupa demasiado” (133). As he remembers this distant memory repeatedly, he admits that he may be amplifying the truth, recombining memories into the narration, but this does not bother him. His one memory is still complex and disordered, as is the nature of memory. The framework of this man’s memory is, of course, much simpler than most, with a simple point, Martín Mantra, at its center, but it is surrounded by countless lines from movies, melodies from songs, and late-night transmissions of foreign television programs. As this one memory takes over, the role of these pieces of media increases until they become responses used by the narrator in real-life situations, lines from the past as important as any spoken to him in person.

In recalling the media he has seen, this narrator does not simply recall the content of works. He remembers the experience of seeing the works—the room he was in, what Martín said, how he felt at the time. As these past memories take over his mind, the narrator finds himself in a situation similar to Soergel’s in “La memoria de Shakespeare:” another set of memories are overpowering his more recent ones. In this case, however, the memories come from his own past, but the results are similar. The narrator remembers almost nothing of his
current life or of anything that has happened since his childhood, and his current actions are reflections of these past memories. This is evident in the way he plays the role of HAL 9000 with his doctor, the need to travel to Mexico City, and even in his suicide. His first memory of Martín Mantra is the time that they played Russian roulette with Mantra’s revolver, and in the Mexico City airport he steals a police officer’s revolver and kills himself. His present is defined by this small portion of his memory, but the effects of his actions seem multiplied; putting a gun in his mouth and pulling the trigger is just a foolishly dangerous childhood game the first time, but here it results in his death, his only release from the burdens of a memory out of sync with his current situation.

The second, and longest, portion of the novel is “Durante: El muerto de los días,” narrated by a recently-deceased French luchador, who is speaking directly to María-Marie Mantra, Martín’s cousin. He explains that he is in Mictlán, the Mexican underworld, where a cable connected to his head feeds images to a television, showing him segments of his life. Technology is used to dig up images of the past, as with the first narrator’s photo, and once again in black-and-white. But these pieces of his life are not told in chronological order, appearing, instead, in encyclopedia format:

No es cierto, tampoco, María-Marie, eso de que en el último segundo de tu vida pase frente a tus ojos la vida entera como si se tratase de un programa de televisión cargado de anfetaminas hasta las antenas. Lo que ocurre, lo que ocurrió—al menos en mi caso—es algo muy diferente: en el momento del final del principio y del principio del final aparece Rod Serling, el tipo ese que presentaba The Twilight Zone – ¿te acuerdas, María-Marie?— y te informa que a
Serling tells him that this will allow his memories to function as pieces of information, accessible in chunks organized according to the language of the place you died. This makes the second section a series of alphabetical entries, ranging in size and content. Just like the first section of the novel, however, these memories are intertwined with countless pieces of media, as illustrated by the reappearance of Rod Serling. These entries range from personal memories to stories from the lives and histories of others to lists of names of volcanoes and luchadores, spreading the narrator’s experiences across the novel and requiring the reader to reassemble them into a rough chronological outline.

From these brief transmissions of information it is clear that the French man spends his life fascinated by Mexican culture after meeting Black Hole, a “luchador existencialista,” while in the hospital as a child. As an adult in France, he meets María-Marie Mantra, who has suffered amnesia since a car accident, but who comes to remember her connections with her strange extended family back in Mexico City. He later heads to Mexico as a correspondent for the French magazine Snob, where he reconnects with Black Hole and becomes his sidekick, but eventually goes insane and becomes obsessed with Aztec calendars and history, which lead him to kill Black Hole, whose fans then kill the narrator in the ring. Once again, the particulars of the narrator’s history are far less important that the individual pieces of information that make them up, with media from popular culture being the key to understanding the man’s vision of Mexico City. There are repeated references to “La Bamba,” “99 Tears,” Bob Dylan, Serge Gainsbourg, lucha libre B-movies, Christopher Walken dancing in a music video, and the Burt Lancaster film, The Swimmer, among others. And, once again, not all of the media can be found outside the
world of the novel, as seen in the presence of bands like Anorexia y sus flaquitas and films like Martín Mantra’s *Los sufrimientos infinitos de una madre mexicana por culpa de sus hijos y su marido* and *Mundo Mantra*. Unlike the first narrator, remembering the American science-fiction of the 50s and 60s that dominated his media consumption at the time of his childhood, this narrator remembers a lifetime of media from the United States, France, and Mexico from different time periods. Even a historical event like the Tlatelolco massacre is presented in an anecdote about Boris Karloff watching the events on a hotel television screen and thinking about the special effects of the “film” he’s watching. During the narrator’s whole life, whether in France or in Mexico, he has been surrounded by a sea of popular media that he has absorbed into his memories, which are now being recreated on a television screen, creating a feedback loop of information. Much like Martín as he watches films, the narrator offers a running commentary, all of it addressed to María-Marie, that connects the alphabetical entries of his personal encyclopedia. If anything, this section takes the media-saturation of the first and expands on it, adding references that reach in various directions of time and space, tracing the globalized nature of the modern world and the difficulty of creating something direct and unified when information comes from so many sources.

All of these media references, and their deep connections with the character’s histories, reflect the role technology has played in the western world’s collective and personal memories. Every song, film, or television episode is a transmission of information, the true cultural currency of the modern age. Paz Soldán looks at the multitude of information sources in *Mantra* and comes to the conclusion that the novel’s characters have become machines that receive and retransmit pieces of information:
Gracias a su relación con la máquina (en este caso, la televisión), el ser humano pierde agencia, se convierte en parte de los procesos de intercambio de una sociedad capitalista y globalizada: ésta necesita producir flujos de información que, al ser procesados, producen más flujos de información. Como se sugirió antes, el poder viral de la información, la transformación del individuo, están necesariamente relacionados con el desarrollo del capitalismo tardío [ . . . ]. Mantra explora el momento en que la psiquis del individuo se ha convertido en un canal a través del cual circula la información mediatizada, necesaria para el funcionamiento del capitalismo global. (106)

According to Paz Soldán, the system of information exchange takes these characters and reduces them to “channels” that keep the wheels of global capitalism turning. In this light, the characters become storytelling machines, taking the input of countless narrative threads and weaving them into the transmissions of their own stories in a process not unlike Elena’s endless storytelling in *La ciudad ausente*, but without the subversive subtext. This assessment also brings with it the implicit loss of some of the subjects’ humanity, as even the process of being entertained has become part of a machine-like system. This squares with Jean Baudrillard’s assessment of the destructive power of information in the essay “The Implosion of Meaning in the Media,” in which he claims that “information dissolves meaning and dissolves the social, in a sort of nebulous state dedicated not to a surplus of innovation, but, on the contrary, to total entropy” (81). This entropy is reflected in the novel, with its fragmented storylines and references to media both real and invented, and one can see how these characters become increasingly isolated as they fall into memories of media consumption. Technology supplements and supplants
personal recollection, filling the characters’ minds with memories that happened to other people, both historical and fictional.

This idea of *memoria ajena*, of memories from outside of personal experience, is a staple of modern science fiction, where through technology memories can be implanted or transmitted to others in another example of the exchange of information. This can become a pessimistic view of human thought, mechanized to the point of becoming a technological extension of the Pavlonian response, with television and music as the bells that invoke involuntary responses. This again brings to mind Ricardo Piglia’s assessment of the novelistic history of external memory, in which he explains how the modern novel shows a distinct shift in the nature of memory when compared with past classics, such as Proust:

La metáfora borgeana de la memoria ajena, con su insistencia en la claridad de los recuerdos artificiales, está en el centro de la narrativa contemporánea. En la obra de Burroughs, de Pynchon, de Gibson, de Philip Dick, asistimos a la destrucción del recuerdo personal. O mejor, a la sustitución de la memoria propia por una cadena de secuencias y de recuerdos extraños. Narrativamente podríamos hablar de la muerte de Proust, en el sentido de la muerte de la memoria como condición de la temporalidad personal y la identidad verdadera. Los narradores contemporáneos se pasean por el mundo de Proust como Fabrizio en Waterloo: un paisaje en ruinas, el campo después de una batalla. No hay memoria propia ni recuerdo verdadero, todo pasado es incierto y es impersonal.

In *Mantra*, these *memorias ajenas* do not come from some fantastic or futuristic transfer of consciousness, as in “La memoria de Shakespeare” or *La ciudad ausente*, but rather from the daily act of consuming media. The screen and the speaker serve as sites where memories of the
past and present can be packaged into easily transmissible and retrievable segments, easy to recall due to their catchy melodies and striking imagery. From the first two sections of the novel, it would seem mankind is moving towards a world of pure media, where personal experience is lost in the labyrinth of information, and one can only hope to achieve immortality by becoming incorporated into media in some way. This adds to the uncertainty already built in to memory, as now the modern subject can never be sure which memories “actually happened” and which were part of a television program or film. If both Baudrillard and Piglia are correct, the proliferation of information will not only dissolve the social but the very concept of personal memory in a process with little regard for country of origin or station in life; from top to bottom, media consumption is the norm.

In this light, it is no surprise that the final section, “Después: El temblor,” is narrated by an android. Martín Mantra, a.k.a Mantrax, has succeeded in bringing about the destructive earthquake that will supposedly bring to pass the future rebirth of the human race. The narrating robot is part mummy from Guadalajara—an image that brings to mind El Santo’s B-movies—and part machine, with a luchador mask on his face. He is the embodiment of the media-saturated future that could be extrapolated from the first two segments of the novel, where a machine brings life to the past and the cultural detritus of today literally becomes the face of tomorrow. This posthuman narrator embodies the idea of a programmed self, a personality built entirely from code, from lines of information. One could reasonably expect this narrator to be just as fragmented as the earthquake-stricken Mexico City he visits, a robotic extension of the first two narrators, spouting off lines from movies and popular songs, but here there is a dramatic shift in cultural source material. The robot begins by saying:
Vine al D.F. –vine a las ruinas de lo que alguna vez fue el D.F. y que ahora es Nueva Tenochtitlan del Temblor— porque me dijeron que aquí vivía mi Padre Creador, que aquí vivía Mantrax.

Mi Computadora Madrecita me lo dijo. Y yo le prometí que vendría a verlo en cuanto a ella se le agotara su fuente de energía. (513)

These lines, robotic variations on the opening paragraphs of Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*, show that the important medium here is literature, and the following pages continue to mirror Rulfo’s novel. The robot is named P.P. MAC@rio, a name that simultaneously brings to mind *Pedro Páramo*, the 1960 Mexican film *Macario*, Macintosh computers, and an email address. P.P. meets a guide who informs him that Mantrax has died and that in Nueva Tenochtitlan everyone is a son of Mantrax. In the ruins of the D.F., still trembling from the never-ending earthquake, the android sees a finished *Mundo Mantra*, which has Martín Mantra first appearing on the screen reading a book, followed by images from the final days of Mexico City. The presence of books where television had been the dominant cultural reference point creates a link between both types of narrative, placing the written word alongside film and music, adding writing to the technologies that can create a framework for memory. Just as the popular media of the first two sections can form the basis of the character’s recollections, these programmed beings seem to have a memory of past literature that they most likely have never read themselves. P.P. says that his memory “no era más que el fantasma de la memoria de mi Padre Creador copiado sobre el fantasma de mi Computadora Madrecita” (514). He calls his memory a ghost while in the middle of reenacting a novel about ghosts sharing fragments of their pasts. *Mantra*, in this sense, is what the murmurs of Comala could have sounded like if the dead had spent their lives watching television and listening to “La Bamba.” Each generation of memories, based on a past that no
longer exists—or that never existed—provides the next one with the phantoms of the media of its time, predicting a world where media consumed generations earlier can become an integral part of the future even when nobody mentions it by name. This final section is by far the most chronologically ordered and least fragmented, perhaps due to the narrator’s robotic memory. Where the previous sections ended in death, in this final section P.P. chooses to fire his last bullet at the sky rather than commit suicide, showing that the earlier environment of death does not have to be the rule. As the android repeatedly sings a song, those remaining in Nueva Tenochtitlán remember the words and join in, and there is a kind of hope in this unified act of singing as the long-awaited end of the earthquake arrives; soon it will be “el Día de los Vivos” (531). The obsession with death has ended, but the importance of media to organize society remains. A song about a sign the first narrator sees in the Mexico City airport proves to be what is needed to jar the cultural memory of the survivors, and even if their memories are programmed, there is hope. Information is used here, after so much separation and dissolution, to bring society back together, to create social meaning rather than implode it.

Though not mentioned directly in Mantra, this type of consumption of media leading to a restructuring of a man’s identity and memory has its precursor in Spanish literature’s most famous character—Don Quixote de la Mancha. In an essay titled “Apuntes para una teoría de lo quijotesco como virus,” Fresán calls the novel an “animal que básica y genéricamente no es otra cosa que una forma sublimada de la memoria” (132). A novel takes experiences and memories and, just like the screen and the speaker, turns the page into a site of information transmission, allowing fictions to be absorbed into the memory. Don Quixote is much like the characters in Mantra in that he too took in a large amount of media—Romance novels—and internalized it to the point of acting on it, letting the novels he read become the framework of his memories and
experiences. Just like the famous knight-errant, Martín Mantra bases his actions for creating a better world on the works of fiction that fill his mind, and in a similar way causes destruction through his efforts. And, in viewing lo quiotesco as having the potential to spread in viral fashion, one can see a connection to viral media that, in the modern world, has a way of spreading throughout the world and “infecting” countless minds in a short amount of time.

Media has a way of altering memory and restructuring perception, of leaping off the page or screen and into reality, as illustrated in characters ranging from Don Quixote to P.P. MAC@rio. Douglas Rushkoff defines this “media virus” as capable of entering the mind and forcing retransmission, just like a biological virus:

> Media viruses spread through the datasphere the same way biological ones spread through the body or a community. But instead of traveling along an organic circulatory system, a media virus travels through the networks of the mediaspace. The ‘protein shell’ of a media virus might be an event, invention, technology, system of thought, musical riff, visual image, scientific theory, sex scandal, clothing style, or even a pop hero—as long as it can catch our attention. Any one of these media virus shells will search out the receptive nooks and crannies in popular culture and stick on anywhere it is noticed. Once attached, the virus injects its more hidden agendas into the datastream in the form of ideological code—not genes, but a conceptual equivalent we now call ‘memes.’ Like real genetic material, these memes infiltrate the way we do business, educate ourselves, interact with one another—even the way we perceive reality. (9-10)

In Don Quixote’s case, the basis of these memes was an idealized sense of chivalry, with its attendant focus on righting wrongs and helping the defenseless. For the characters of Mantra,
however, the messages of their media culture are more confused, as noted in *The Twilight Zone*’s constant blurring of the established boundaries of reality. And some characters seem to internalize the same media differently, as noted in the way Martín considers himself *2001*’s monolith, while the first narrator feels more like HAL 9000. Like real viruses, information viruses can embed themselves differently in different hosts, and since memory can later and rewrite upon recall, these variations in the way the characters remember media can vary greatly.

Recently, clinical psychology has found evidence of media affecting memory retrieval in studies exploring the use of a “Media Memory Lane” to help Alzheimer’s patients (Olsen, et al.) or the way viewing an aggressive film can make it easier to retrieve aggressive responses from memory (Bushman). Even if the modern subject does not take the kaleidoscopic nature of media to the same fragmentary extremes as in *Mantra*, the novel reflects an important truth about the information age: that all of us have memories and mental structures that originated from the world of media around us, and as such media multiplies, so will the fragmentation of personal memory. We are all, in this sense, postmodern reflections of Don Quixote, basing our perceptions and actions on the works we have seen, heard, and read, even if we do not realize it. It could be for that reason that Fresán says in his essay that “Entonces, dentro de muy poco, el mundo no será Tlön. El mundo será un lugar inolvidable, una Mancha que todo lo cubrirá y que no podrá ser borrada” (152). *Mantra* reflects this same idea, but with different source material, showing how the information contained in our media is internalized, changing us while we, in turn, change it and create more to pass on. It is no surprise, then, that *The Twilight Zone* is a key allusion when so many episodes involve apocalyptic viruses and shifts in perception, providing a science-fiction equivalent of the role of viral information in the modern world. The stories from the media now seem to outnumber the stories of personal memory, tipping the balance towards
media as a key creator and transmitter of memory. Javier Moreno sees this in the use of language within the novel:

*Mantra*, in short, explores the way words recoil back when they are shot. It experiments with the mechanisms that allow each word to summon a moment, a memory, a place. We never leave the past behind, we keep everything encoded. Anything (one city, one woman, one country, one life) can be recovered (or built) out of words. (“My Own Private Mexico”)

However, while *Mantra* is a novel built entirely out of words, it should be noted that the characters experience this same phenomenon with melodies, photographs, films, and television programs. Their stories, like Soergel’s and Elena’s, are made of words that attempt to capture the essence of their visual, auditory, and literary experiences; more than anything, their words function as cues to remember, like the photograph that the first narrator keeps with him. The strands of media references may be just small pieces or scenes from a larger work, but each one has the potential to cause the reader to recover and rebuild his own past encounters with that media. In the end, even an alphabetical encyclopedia, a mass of words, can contain the most important cues from a lifetime of memories.
These three works explore the way memory and narrative interact, ranging from Shakespeare’s tragedies to Rod Serling’s television show. In all of these works, one thing is clear: fictional narratives play out in the reader’s or viewer’s mind, creating new memories of the experiences of another, and in many cases an “other” that does not exist outside of these mental representations. Episodic memory, as noted above, is a representation of past experiences, a process of rewriting and rebuilding that is prone to errors and inventions. For the same reasons, however, it is the fertile ground where imagination can expand beyond the realm of personal experience, where scenes from literature can play like realistic simulations in the mind. This is the portion of the mind susceptible to memoria ajena, where external ideas can take hold and reshape memories. As the role of media expands in the world, so does its importance to memory.

The concept of memoria ajena has many elements that this study does not explore, such as the ethics of remembering external experiences. The use of recent scientific and psychological research and its relation to literature merits further investigation and integration with current literary studies. While it is true that literature creates worlds that do not have to follow the physical and biological laws of our world, these three works show that fiction exploring memory can reflect, and even illuminate, some of the inner workings of the mind. As Soergel notes, great authors know what to do with the “material deleznabe” of memory (78), how to make it into something that works its way into the reader’s mind and stays like a memory. These external memories can have all the warmth and power of personal memories, and in unexpected moments can return to the mind. These works show that there can be confusion in recalling a foreign experience, but that this can also be revelatory: Soergel learns to live in his present, Junior
becomes part of the greater story he is investigating, and P.P, MAC@rio is able bring scattered people together through a forgotten song. The modern world can lead one to question if all memories are, in some way, programmed by external forces, but these works seem to suggest that even more important that what one remembers is how one remembers it. The constructive process of memory is one of its great strengths, allowing literature to become the vibrant, living thing that it is. As Piglia says in his essay on “La Memoria de Shakespeare:”

Las escenas de los libros leídos vuelven como recuerdos privados. (Robinson Crusoe retrocede ante una huella en la arena; la menor de los Compson se desliza al alba por la ventana del piso alto; Johannes Dahlmann empuña con firmeza el cuchillo, que acaso no sabrá manejar, y sale a la llanura.) Son acontecimientos entreverados en el fluir de la vida, experiencias inolvidables que vuelven a la memoria, como una música. (“Shakespeare”)

The beauty of this process is that for Borges, Piglia, and Fresán, their internalized memorias ajenas are now externalized, converted back into literature. And with these layers of literary references, new connections arise—Soergel and Shakespeare’s writings, Elena and the Dirty War, Martín Mantra and The Twilight Zone. These works have the potential to serve as new nudos blancos, new points of connection between people and events, both real and fictional, providing new stories for the present to use in its attempt to understand the past and the future.


Dangelo, Biagio. “Antiguas posesiones: La memoria de Borges y la cara de Shakespeare.”


