CHAPTER 3
ALTERED SENSATION AND SELF-UNDERSTANDING IN BORGES’S FICTIONS

We saw in the previous chapter that a philosophically significant dialectical movement between the ideal realm and artistic engagement with experience informs Borges’s aesthetic approach to blindness in his ‘fictions.’ Furthermore, it is evident that this dialectic possesses a self-constitutive power, and shapes the author’s creativity. In the present chapter, I show that Borges was keenly aware of various kinds of disability experience, by interpreting six short stories which cover half a century of his fiction-writing career (1934-1983). I will focus, in these selected ‘fictions,’ on instances of direct emphasis on disability experience such as paralysis and blindness, and will illustrate the point that being reflective about disability indicates a deepened awareness of, and interest in, the fragility of corporeal existence.

As already suggested, Borges had conflicting feelings about being blind. His experience of gradually-advancing blindness over many years contributed to his varying attitudes towards it. Manguel states, “His was a particular kind of blindness, grown on him gradually since the age of 30 and settled in for good after his 58th birthday” (15-6). Borges himself discusses the state of being blind in all the literary genres he practised – short fiction, poetry, the essay, lectures, and interviews. Manguel writes, “Borges often talked about his own blindness, mainly with literary interest” (16). Borges’s ambiguous attitude to his blindness is evident in the humour in the following words from “Blindness”: “[I]t is not that perfect blindness which people imagine” (Seven Nights 86). He was conscious of how blindness could lead to creativity. This awareness is manifested in a number of his writings. For instance, in the poetic short story entitled
“The Maker” from the eponymous collection (1960), the narrator imagines what another great blind poet of the Western tradition, Homer, felt as he gradually became blind, and through the experience of blindness, realised that he had the creative potential to sing great epic poems. In the poem “In Praise of Darkness,” originally published in Spanish in 1969, the speaker, referring to the consequences of his blindness, tells of “reading and transforming” texts “in my memory” (*Poems of the Night* 103). These words point to the vertiginous creative process in a blind poet. However, Borges expresses regret at the loss of sight and the difficulties he consequently faced in writing and reading in “Blindness” as well as in the interview with Seamus Heaney and Richard Kearney that “took place in Dublin on 16th June, 1982, Bloomsday” (71), on the occasion of James Joyce’s centenary celebration: “Since I lost my sight in the fifties, I have not been able to exult in writing in this casual manner. I have had to dictate everything, to become a dictator rather than a playboy of words. . . . But I miss being able to read even more than being able to write” (“The World of Fiction” 78). Here Borges expresses a desire to see words on paper – a wish that blindness has made poignant for the author.

Borges’s narrative on blindness is, however, not one of straightforward sorrow at the loss of his sight, but a nuanced one that recognises the multifaceted nature of disability experience. In “Poem of the Gifts,” he writes of the supremely ironic experience of becoming the director of the National Library of Argentina in 1955, and losing his sight around the same time. He talks about the “splendid irony” of God, who “granted me books and blindness at one touch” (*Poems of the Night* 57). When he

1. This narrative occupies our interest in both Chapters 2 and 3.

2. This activity reminds us of Borges’s rich “remembered library” (Reid 5).
articulates the realisation that for him being blind is not a complete tragedy, it becomes
evident that he recognises the value of blindness and its consequences in his life: “It
should be seen as a way of life: one of the styles of living.” In contrast to the ironic gifts
referred to above, he even speaks of owing “to the darkness some [advantageous] gifts.”
After he became blind, he learned new languages – Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic, and
also wrote poetry. Thus he succeeded in creating a whole new world, replacing “the
visible world with the aural world” (Selected Non-Fictions 478). In the light of the
above discussion, it becomes clear that deformities are, in the lives of those who are
disabled, one among the many aspects of experience which define their subjectivities.

The underlying premise and structuring principle of my argument in the present
chapter is that bodily deformities affect self-conception in diverse, observable ways.
Given his “literary interest” in blindness, Borges’s ‘fictions’ manifest an intense
awareness of this corporeal, sensory process of understanding the self. His engagement
of senses is not restricted to representation of disabled characters in his fiction. Borges’s
experientially altered sense of the self and of the world conditions his many narrative
choices, especially those related to voice, perspective, and time. Let us first consider the
question of time in selected short stories in his oeuvre.

While talking about his blindness in his lecture on that subject, Borges describes
it in terms of the experience of time, of night descending slowly over the world, lasting
more than three quarters of a century: “In my case, that slow nightfall, that slow loss of
sight began when I began to see. It has continued since 1899 without dramatic
moments, a slow nightfall that has lasted more than three quarters of a century”
(Selected Non-Fictions 474-75). This correlation of the gradual onset of blindness and
the experience of time can also be seen in the short story “The Other,” which appears in
the collection _The Book of Sand_ (1975), where the narrator-protagonist says: “Gradual blindness is . . . like the slowly growing darkness of a summer evening” (417). I want to suggest that the differential sense of time is a function of alternative bodily being. In the short stories I take up for this study, one can observe that when characters lose, in part or whole, the faculty of the senses, they come to acquire a different understanding of time; time slows down for many of them. I argue that the reasons for this novel sense of time are as follows. The character with the deformity is restricted in movement, and spends his time in physically non-active, but intensely contemplative ways. He has a heightened awareness of reality, and an expansive sense of time. He also begins to notice unmistakable similarities in experiences, perceptions, and memories from day to day. The disabled character’s experiential homogeneity, thus, calls up the theme of repetition and the idea of circular time. My contention is that Borges pertinently foregrounds the consequence of bodily deformities in a differential matrix of sensations which, in these short stories, appears as a creative temporal consciousness.

Distinguishing between himself and people “who suddenly lose their sight,” Borges says that his case was not “especially dramatic” (Selected Non-Fictions 474) because he had lost his sight slowly, over a long period of time. Thus, he had got enough time to adjust to his disability. (However, as is clear from the foregoing pages, even late in his life, Borges had difficulties accepting blindness and its consequences.) But the latter, that is, those who become blind or acquire other bodily deformities suddenly, are plunged into a life with disability without any warning. In the short stories I have chosen for this study, Borges examines both experiential paradigms of disability. We should not fail to note how time plays a significant role in the above distinction among disability experiences.
3.1. Durée and Intuition

Before we move further into a discussion of Borges’s short stories, let us turn our attention to Bergson’s philosophy of time, or as he terms it in the preface to *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, of duration (‘durée’) (Lacey 26). This will enable us to throw some light on certain aspects of the argument pertaining to time and self-understanding. In the preface to *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Bergson distinguishes between science and philosophy. He states that the subject matter of the former is “spatialized time and . . . space,” while that of the latter is “real duration.” Imagining the self to be a sphere, he finds that its surface is composed of elements bound to one another – perceptions, memories, tendencies, and habits. Consequently, it is turned towards “the external world” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 10). But if we penetrate this surface, and reach the depth of our person, we will find a “solidly organized” continuous flow of states which Bergson calls ‘duration.’ A.R. Lacey describes it as “‘concrete time’” (28). It involves continuous change. This duration is “constitutive” of a person’s “being” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 15). Thus, in this flow of states that is truly the self, time is of paramount significance.

The durational flow is “profoundly animated with a common life” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 11). This unique “current of feeling” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 12), which runs through the temporal continuum of the self, fashions the unique character of each person. Every state in this “succession of states . . . announces what follows and contains what precedes” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 11). This clearly indicates the central importance of memory in the life of the person. When we have the consciousness attending to the flow in the depth of the person, both “the past and
present” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 23) of the self are seized by it. This necessarily means, first, that the consciousness acts in time, that all its actions – the roles it plays in affections and in intuition, for instance – are temporal in nature, and that it is, for this reason, not possible to have “a consciousness without memory” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 12); and secondly, that ‘duration’ is animated by memory.3

Bergson declares that the self can be comprehended in its flowing “from within” only “by intuition and not by simple analysis” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 9). He understands intuition to mean a “sympathy” or spiritual power with the help of which the person can enter an object and understand its essence by coinciding with it (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 6). He illustrates the work of intuition in the following statement: “When you lift your arm, you accomplish a movement the simple perception of which you have inwardly” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 5-6). We know our body, which is a part of the external world, not only by perceptions, but also by ‘affections’ (first-hand, internal experience). While the former give the person knowledge of his body from without, the latter are a species of intuition which facilitate knowledge of the body “from within” (*Matter and Memory* 1). It is our consciousness which, acting “in the form of feeling or of sensation,” gives rise to affections, and plays a role in all the actions we perform with awareness (*Matter and Memory* 2).

### 3.2. Disabled Characters and Variations in Subjective Time

Having taken this important detour into Bergson’s process philosophy, we come to Borges’s fiction. I will first look at “The End” (168-70) in order to examine the theme of time. This short story was first published in 1953. “The End” has as one of its

3. Bergson goes so far as to declare that “consciousness means memory” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 11).
three main characters a disabled man, Recabarren, the proprietor of a general-store-and-bar who is paralysed suddenly one day. The occurrence that is central to the plot (in more ways than one) happened seven years before the short story begins, and is only summarised in the second paragraph of the narrative. This is “the payada, or song contest” (Fishburn and Hughes 98) between “a black man [a stranger in those parts] who had shown up one night flattering himself that he was a singer” and “another stranger” (168) who is the enemy of the former, the knife fighter Martín Fierro. That the event took place seven years earlier is evident from the black man’s words to Fierro that he had been waiting for that length of time (169). On that occasion, not only did Recabarren, who acts as a witness in the short story, first set eyes on the black man and Fierro, but the incident also prompts the reader to infer that the two antagonists were already acquainted with each other. It is noteworthy how the former directly “challenged” the latter to the contest (168). The inference is proved to be correct when we learn that Fierro had killed the black man’s brother seven years earlier. Further, the song contest prefigures the final encounter between them – the duel. Fierro, getting ready for the knife fight, says tiredly to the black man, “‘Leave that guitar alone, now—you’ve got another kind of contest to try to win today.’” The same idea is hinted at in the following exchange between the two men. Referring to the approaching contest, the black man says, “‘Could be this one goes as bad for me as the other one did.’” Fierro replies, “‘It’s not that the first one went bad for you . . . It’s that you couldn’t wait to get to the second one’” (170). The song contest stands out in Recabarren’s memory for one more important reason. It was the day after the event that he became paralysed: “[He] would never forget that contest; the next day, as he was trying to straighten some bales of yerba, his right side had suddenly gone dead on him, and he discovered that he
couldn't talk” (168). The onset of his paralysis, and the resulting speech disability, are life-changing events for the man.

Recabarren is a contrastive figure in the tale. His disability sets him apart, literally and character-wise, from the black man and Fierro, and more generally from the rest of society. Before becoming paralysed, he was actively engaged in the day-to-day running of his establishment. This is indicated when we are told that “he was trying to straighten some bales of yerba” when the disability set in. When the narrative commences, we find him “lying on his back,” just waking from his sleep (168), and in a contemplative mood. He does not rise from his bed throughout the short story, which suggests that his paralysis does not allow him to. His movements have thus been severely restricted for seven years by his disability. In contrast, the black man and Fierro have been engaged in their respective activities: they are gauchos (Fishburn and Hughes 98). The former has been waiting for an opportunity to avenge his brother’s killing by the latter, and the latter has been to see his children, as we learn from his words (169), and has also been, we may safely speculate, carrying on with his knife fights. So, Recabarren before paralysis, and the two gauchos before and after their first encounter, follow their respective routines, performing habituated actions in order to complete the day-to-day requirements of their respective livelihoods, living only to fulfil the various goals of their respective lives. In this mode of living, they experience time in terms of definite divisions. If one were to interpret this in Bergsonian terms, they think of time in its “symbolical representations such as hours, days, months and years, which are only its spatial concepts” (Kumar 8). I want to recall how the two gauchos constantly refer to the time that has gone by in terms of the number of days and

---

4. His condition may be described, in medical terms, as hemiplegia, that is, paralysis of one side of the body.
years. In Bergson’s terms, as indicated above, this sort of division of time represents an artificial abstraction (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 53-5). However Recabarren, who is unable to walk or move many parts of his body due to his disability, experiences time differently, as a flow represented by natural processes and events. He is aware of the time – evening – by looking “up at the sky” from his window. We may say, then, that he has aligned his life to the natural rhythms of the earth. The narrator says that he is a “man in the habit of living in the present, as animals do.” His experience of time is symbolised by an aural labyrinth, the music of a guitar, because music is temporal: “From the other room there came the strumming of a guitar, like some inconsequential labyrinth, infinitely tangling and untangling” (168). In Bergson’s terms, this means that Recabarren experiences what Kumar calls “la durée or psychological time” (7), “an immeasurable and multidirectional process” (8). Besides, the moon, which Recabarren notices, symbolises cyclical time, meaning that time is measured in terms of lunar cycles.

In the course of the short story, then, we learn that the black man and Fierro are baying for each other’s blood. Each man is waiting to kill the other, and defend his honour. Therefore, to Fierro’s subtle challenge to a knife fight, the black man says, “‘Fall's coming on, and the days are getting shorter.’” Fierro replies, “‘The light that’s left will be enough for me’” (170). Not a thought of the time that is given to them on earth enters their minds. The black man succeeds in avenging his brother’s killing, and Fierro’s life is brought to a bloody end. Ironically for Fierro, his words about the sufficiency of “‘the light that’s left’” turn out to be true. However, his killing proves, in a less measurable but nevertheless profound way, to be the end of the black man’s life too: “His work of vengeance done, he was nobody now. Or rather, he was the other one:
there was neither destination nor destiny on earth for him, and he had killed a man” (170). Having accomplished the one goal which he had set for himself in his life, he had nothing more to live for.

We saw above the narrator’s observation about Recabarren’s attitude to life as a paralytic: he lives in the present. According to Bergson, the present is not a single “instant in which [time] goes by.” He explains that such an instant is only “a pure conception,” and states that “the real, concrete, live present” which is defined by our “present perception . . . necessarily occupies duration” (Matter and Memory 176). Since knowing the flow of duration includes the awareness of our physical existence, “[the] present is, in its essence, sensory-motor.” This means, then, that “my present consists in the consciousness that I have of my body” (Matter and Memory 177). When Recabarren awakes fully, he is brought into the present by the reality of his situation: “Little by little, reality came back to him, the ordinary things that now would always be just these ordinary things” (168). This draws our attention to his heightened awareness of the repetitive nature of the external world, given the restrictions imposed on his movements by his paralysis. Intensely aware of his body, he knows that he cannot go out into the world to seek the much-needed variety in his life. We may, therefore, interpret his ringing “the brass cowbell that hung at the foot of the cot” (168) to call to him the “boy with Indian-like features,” and his enquiry as to “whether anybody was around” to mean that he wants people to be present, not only for the business, but also because there would then be conversation and stories about events occurring in the world at large. We see how “his left hand played awhile with the bell, as though exercising some power” (169), as though by exercising this power, someone would
arrive at the bar. As it happens, he gets to witness the end of the murderous rivalry between the black man and Fierro.

I suggest that Recabarren’s mind runs in another direction too: since, as indicated above, he knows the duration of his self (Introduction to Metaphysics 22), he is aware of the moving power of “the true memory of the past” (Matter and Memory 197). Bergson describes this “true memory” as “the memory of dreams” (Matter and Memory 199). Thus, we have the following observation partially “focalized through” (Genette 197-8, 209) Recabarren’s consciousness: “The plains, in the last rays of the sun, were almost abstract, as though seen in a dream” (169). The following thoughts express, in some way, the paralysed man’s understanding of what he witnesses: “There is an hour just at evening when the plains seem on the verge of saying something; they never do, or perhaps they do—eternally—though we don’t understand it, or perhaps we do understand but what they say is as untranslatable as music” (170). With this evocation of music, the reader recalls that on waking, Recabarren hears the “infinitely tangling and untangling” labyrinthine “strumming” of the guitar from the adjoining room. In a half-wakeful state – here the phrase “little by little” is suggestive – his consciousness is on the edge of dreams that are also untranslatable. Thus, while the black man’s life has no future to speak of, which suggests that he experiences time as a linear succession, Recabarren’s life holds some promise in terms of dreams and creativity, because he is aware of the durational flow of his self, thus experiencing the concrete flow of time as a “multidirectional” process.

Bergson’s words, “A human being who should dream his life instead of living it would no doubt thus keep before his eyes at each moment the infinite multitude of the details of his past history” (Matter and Memory 201), describe well Ireneo Funes, the
disabled character portrayed in the short story “Funes, His Memory” (131-7). Funes is a much more vibrant character compared to Recabarren. This may be because he is a young man, whereas the storekeeper is older and “perhaps” even has a son (169), the taciturn boy with Indian-like features mentioned above. Borges composed the narrative on Funes, which appears in the collection *Fictions* (1944), as a “testimony” (131) written by the narrator about the young man. The narrator was acquainted with Funes in his youth, and he writes this testimony nearly “half a century” (134) after the latter’s death. He recounts his encounters with Funes, and the account covers, more or less chronologically but in an incomplete manner, Funes’s life before and after his fall off “a half-broken horse on the ranch in San Francisco” (132), and the resulting paralysis. This is, then, a retrospective narrative about Funes and his remarkable memory. In this densely written tale, Borges sets up the narrator-character as a foil to Funes. The narrator also compares Funes with himself, indirectly, and with other people for the purposes of bringing out the differences in character, and highlighting the themes of the short story.

We learn early on in the narrative, when the narrator relates his “first recollection of Funes,”⁵ that Funes had a very good sense of time: “Unexpectedly, Bernardo shouted out to him—*What's the time, Ireneo?* Without consulting the sky, without a second’s pause, the boy replied, *Four minutes till eight, young Bernardo Juan Francisco*” (italics as in the source). Bernardo Haedo, The narrator’s cousin, informed him that Funes “always [knew] what time it was, like a clock” (132). The evocation of

---

⁵ This was the time he saw the boy “one afternoon in March or February of ’84 (1884)” (131)—running quietly along a raised brick sidewalk.
the clock is apt here because, apart from being able to tell the time to the minute, Funes before his accident and paralysis, along with the narrator-character and the rest of society as depicted in the short story, live according to time divided and measured by the clock. This is indicated by the above incident, and by the number of times the narrator gives references to dates in the short story. According to Bergson, it is the nature of reality to flow: “One recognizes the real, the actual, the concrete, by the fact that it is variability itself” (Introduction to Metaphysics 43). Thus, if we consider la durée or concrete time, recalling that it involves in its essence continuous flux, we can say that Funes succeeds in intuiting its flow. The rest of the characters, including the narrator, lead their day-to-day lives unmindful of the continuous change taking place deep within themselves and the world. This is not to say that they are not aware of change; it would be more appropriate to say that they do not recognise and accept it as the primary reality. Evidence for this is to be found throughout the narrative. Take, for instance, the following passage:

I was told he'd been bucked off a half-broken horse on the ranch in San Francisco and had been left hopelessly crippled. I recall the sensation of unsettling magic that this news gave me: The only time I'd seen him, we'd been coming home on horseback from the ranch in San Francisco, and he had been walking along a high place. This new event, told by my cousin Bernardo, struck me as very much like a dream confected out of elements of the past. (emphasis added, 132)

6. A second reference to the clock may be found later on in the narrative (136).

7. The narrator-character even calls him “chronometric Funes” (132).
It is generally accepted that Funes’s paralysis is a great misfortune. The phrase “hopelessly crippled” and the narrator’s observation that “the iron-barred window” behind which the young man lay on his cot “crudely underscored his prisoner like state” (133) signify this attitude. On hearing the news of Funes’s disablement, the narrator-character experiences a “sensation of unsettling magic” because the only time he had seen Funes was when he and his cousin were “coming home on horseback,” and Funes “had [then] been walking along a high place.” Now he could not walk due to his paralysis resulting from a fall off a horse. What is of significance here is the place where the accident occurred – the ranch in San Francisco – and the fact that the two cousins had been returning home from the same place on horseback when they saw Funes. The unsettling feeling that the same thing could have happened to either of them disturbs the narrator-character. As Schor declares,

The relentless focus on ever greater sensual plenitude is pornographic, a denial of the frailty of the human body, of the weight of genetic destiny, of the play of accident and chance and of the vicissitudes of history. . . . though that Body has been [understood to be] “tremulous,” “in pain,” in pieces, the site of torture, disciplining, discrimination, illness, and other forms of insult and injury, it has been regarded as drawing meaning from an implied healthy norm. (83-4)

Despite having come into contact with “the play of accident and chance” in the life of Funes, despite encountering references to two battles (133-35) that caused widespread mutilation and death, and despite the recent death of his uncle Gregorio Haedo, the narrator-character did not, at the time, possess an intuition of “the frailty of the human
body.” This conjecture is strengthened into a conviction when we read of his unfeeling behaviour, and lack of seriousness with respect to the news of his father’s ill health. The telegraphic phrase quoted by the narrator, “my father was ‘not at all well’,” suggests that the man was nearing his end. The narrator’s confession of his cavalier attitude towards his father’s illness and likely death, his admission of being distracted “from any possibility of real pain” by his desire for recognition (133), point to the lack in him, as a youth, of any inkling about the profounder realities of life. He is candid about his character and motives in the narrative because he is narrating the events many years after they occurred.

However, the narrator seems to have moved in the direction of gaining some insight into the flux of life in the course of half a century. This is evident in his mode of narrating what Funes told him about his powers of memory, perception, dreaming, imagination, and about his number system connected to words. The narrator’s incredulity, irritation, understanding, and awe – all come through in his narrative. Thus, he says, “Those are the things he told me; neither then nor later have I ever doubted them.” His sombre observation concerning the fact that not a single study was carried out with Funes on his memory shows that he has come to realise that time never stops flowing, and that change and death are ever-present realities (135). This change in character can be seen in his words of understanding about Funes’s unremitting experience of reality: “no one in the populous towers or urgent avenues” of the wondrous cities of “Babylon, London, and New York . . . has ever felt the heat and pressure of a reality as inexhaustible as that which battered Ireneo, day and night, in his poor South American hinterland” (136-37). However, it becomes evident from his characterisation of Funes as “such a proud young man,” and from the assumption “that
he pretended that his disastrous fall had actually been fortunate” (133), that the narrator shares the widely held non-disabled view of persons with disabilities as weak and helpless.

Describing the first occasion of his meeting with Funes, the narrator makes the following admission: “I am so absent-minded that I would never have given a second thought to the exchange I've just reported” (132). Funes cannot be said to be an “absent-minded” person even before his accident and paralysis, as we learn from the fleeting glimpse we get of him at the beginning of the short story. He tells Bernardo the exact time “without consulting the sky, without a second's pause.” The intensity of his awareness after his fall off the horse, and recovery of consciousness, is symbolised by an image the narrator offers at the opening of the narrative: “I recall him . . . holding a dark passionflower in his hand, seeing it as it had never been seen, even had it been stared at from the first light of dawn till the last light of evening for an entire lifetime” (131). What is of interest here is the correlation between the act of perception and time. According to Bergson, “However brief we suppose any perception to be, it always occupies a certain duration, and involves consequently an effort of memory which prolongs one into another a plurality of moments” (Matter and Memory 25). Thus, we see the involvement of “an effort of memory” in Funes’s perception:

Not only was it difficult for him to see that the generic symbol "dog" took in all the dissimilar individuals of all shapes and sizes, it irritated him that the "dog" of three-fourteen in the afternoon, seen in profile, should be indicated by the same noun as the dog of three-fifteen, seen frontally. His own face in the mirror, his own hands, surprised him every time he saw them. (136)
As the above quote indicates, Funes’s perception had become so extraordinarily keen after the accident that he could perceive all the variations in the external world and the moment-to-moment changes occurring in the creatures and objects around him as well as in himself. He, thus, had a heightened awareness of reality. We may draw three conclusions from this: first, Funes’s awareness of change through time points unmistakably to the work of memory in perception; second, as a result of his awareness of this variety and of continuous change, he believed (1) that only particulars existed (137); and (2) that each individual, from moment to moment, should be referred to using different symbols; and third, his perception of all the details that characterise reality and the changes that it suffers from one moment to the next means that Funes had placed himself in “the flow of duration” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 39).

As Funes was detached from action due to his paralysis, time had slowed down for him. To quote Bergson on duration,

> May we not conceive, for instance, that the irreducibility of two perceived colours is due mainly to the narrow duration into which are contracted the billions of vibrations which they execute in one of our moments? If we could stretch out this duration, that is to say, live it at a slower rhythm, should we not, as the rhythm slowed down, see these colours pale and lengthen into successive impressions, still coloured, no doubt, but nearer and nearer to coincidence with pure vibrations? ([*Matter and Memory* 268-69])

Accordingly, when Funes woke up after the fall, he realised that “the present was so rich, so clear, that it was almost unbearable, as were his oldest and even his most trivial memories.” When he saw, for instance, a wineglass, he could perceive “every grape that
had been pressed into the wine and all the stalks and tendrils of its vineyard.” One look at, or one feel of, a thing was enough for him to remember it forever in all its sensory aspects. He could effortlessly manipulate all the images in his vast memory, combining them, comparing one with another, and so on. The narrator refers to his awareness of each one of his dreams, and his ability to intuit the forms of complex things and creatures in their incessant process of becoming: “[A]nything he thought, even once, remained ineradicably with him” (135). These remarkable powers are proof of a very creative mind.

In Bergson’s terms, the narrator is a person who sets great store by “abstract ideas” (Introduction to Metaphysics 17), and shows a preference for the ability to generalise and think in terms of concepts (137). Thus, he excludes all other modes of viewing reality. Bergson intensely distrusts this kind of thinking. When the “variation” of reality is “resolved” into “different concepts” (Introduction to Metaphysics 48) by conceptual thinking, “the stable drives away the unstable” (Matter and Memory 269). Therefore, what we get are merely “so many stable visions of the instability of the real” (Introduction to Metaphysics 48). Reality, as mentioned above, is unstable and, by nature, variable. Funes intuitively knew this reality in its flowing, and was aided by his “perfect” memory and perception (135): “He saw—he noticed—the progress of death, of humidity. He was the solitary, lucid spectator of a multiform, momentous, and almost unbearably precise world” (136). Who was this person if not someone who knew the durational flow of his self and the world? Funes, then, “stretch[ed] out this duration, that is to say, live[d] it at a slower rhythm.” Due to the slowed rhythm of time, he could actually perceive the incessantly varying shades of reality in its flowing. So, when the narrator voices his suspicion that Funes “was not very good at thinking,” and goes on to
explain that he could not “ignore (or forget) differences,” and “generalize . . . abstract” (137), he shows merely that he has not understood Funes’s mind.

When the narrator of “Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv” (40-4) opens with the statement, “In the year 120 of the Hegira, or 736 of the Christian era, there was born in Turkestan the man Hakim” (40), he is placing Hakim in a temporal system different from the modern, scientific system, wherein time is spatialised and, thus, understood to be a linear succession. The Islamic reckoning of time depends, firstly, on the date of the Prophet Muhammad’s Flight (42) from Mecca to Medina in 622 A.D. and, secondly, on the cycles of the moon. Muslims rely on a lunar calendar. Here we must note that the narrator refers repeatedly to the moon to mean ‘month’ (41-3) while, at the same time, giving dates according to the Muslim calendar. This portrayal of time as a cyclical phenomenon parallels the representation of Hakim as a prophet. This is a manifestation of repetition, because he plays the role of a prophet who comes just over a century and a half after the coming of the Prophet Muhammad. However, although the year is measured by the cyclical movement of the moon, and Islamic mythology displays an element of repetition, as the narrator of “The Zahir” remarks, the Islamic conception of time is rigid. He refers to “the hard, solid time of Islam,” (245) which is the opposite of Bergsonian time.

I consider the narratorial statement “Hakim's voice attempted one final deception” (44), which comes towards the close of the narrative, to be a pointer to the career of Hakim the masked dyer of Merv. He leads a life of deception, motivated by his ambition for power, deceiving the people and religious rulers of his land and, ultimately, even himself. We learn that “the people of that time and that region were to call [him] The Veiled” (40). This epithet is apt, both literally and figuratively, because
first he wears a mask and later, with increasing power and wealth, “a fourfold veil of white silk embroidered with precious stones” (42). He does this in order to hide his face – which is disfigured due to leprosy (44) – as well as his designs from the world. As the narrator suggests at the beginning of the tale, Hakim is not a man who follows the dictates of religion. He was trained to be “a dyer—the craft, known to be a refuge for infidels and impostors and inconstant men, which inspired the first anathemas of his career” (41). The above declaration seems to be a hint to the reader that he would go on to become one of the disreputable men mentioned in the quote. This suspicion is strengthened when we read the narrator’s quote from “a famous page” of The Annihilation of the Rose: “Thus did I sin in the years of my youth, deforming the true colours of the creatures” (italics as in the source, 41). Here the suggestion is that he is a man who hides his “true colours” from the world.

When Hakim contracts leprosy, he immediately becomes an outcast, and has to disappear from his community. To understand the peremptoriness of this societal requirement, we need only consider the narrator’s description of people with leprosy as “a band of loathsome lepers” (43), and his graphic description of Hakim’s disfigured face. These narratorial statements clearly imply that the man is a monster. That the society of his times regarded lepers with hatred is shown when Hakim is assassinated for being a leper, and for deceiving the world and his followers by representing himself as a prophet while actually being a loathed outcast (44). The aforementioned points not only bring out the narrator’s perspective on Hakim’s illness, but also the attitudes prevalent in that age and society towards those having leprosy.

Thus, when Hakim is infected with leprosy, and progressively acquires bodily deformities, his life in society comes to an abrupt end. The regular, legitimate avenues
of fulfilling his ambitions are closed to him. He is forced to abandon mainstream conceptions of what life means, and has to come to terms with a hard existence away from humanity and the comforts of society. He has to struggle for food and shelter along with other lepers. He comes to adopt a way of thinking according to which life appears to be a difficult daily grind. Time seems to stretch ahead interminably, the future bringing the same, never-ending struggles. It is worth noting that the narrative is silent about the twelve years (146-58 Hegira) that elapse between his disappearance from Merv and reappearance as the Masked Prophet (41). During this long period, one imagines that he suffers from a consuming anger against society. Understandably, he cannot acquiesce to the degrading life imposed on lepers and other outcasts. Being a man who possesses great cunning and knowledge of human nature, he conceives an audacious and ruthless plan to better his lot, and gain power and glory. He decides to make use of his illness and bodily deformities in a bid to achieve his ends, representing himself as The Veiled Prophet and, in the process, placing himself in the cyclical history of the prophets.

Hakim’s cynical cosmogony is a reflection of his self-conception. This is to be seen in his obsession with hiding his body from the world (given prevalent attitudes towards those affected by leprosy, and the resulting bodily deformities), and also from himself. This leads to his being obsessed with his face, and investing it with divine power (42). His understanding of life is adequately captured in the statement: “The earth we inhabit is an error, an incompetent parody. Mirrors and paternity are abominable because they multiply and affirm it” (43). This is because the former reveal to us ourselves – the broken brass mirror acts as a symbol of Hakim’s cosmogony and self-conception (42) – and the latter prolongs life on earth. Significantly, to the person
who is consigned to his mirror-like, symmetrically identical domains of hell, the
Prophet says, “Here, in this life, dost thou suffer one body; in death and Retribution,
thou shalt have bodies innumerable” (44). Thus, to have a body which is deformed in
this world is, according to his experience, enormous suffering; to have innumerable
such bodies in hell is incalculable suffering.

3.3. Memory, Cyclical Time, and Creativity

The next three short stories, viz. “The Maker” (292-93), “The Other,” and
the ideas of repetition and circular time. In these stories, Borges also deals with the
theme of “gradual blindness.” The following narrative statement is the key to
elucidating “The Maker”: “Then he descended into his memory, which seemed to him
endless” (293). Before blindness, the maker was a “keen, curious” (292), and sensitive
man, who “had never lingered among the pleasures of memory. Impressions,
momentary and vivid, would wash over him [and] could flood the entire circuit of his
soul.” He was, then, a man who lived immersed solely in the present (292). This means
that he “remain[ed] seated” in the concrete present “in virtue of the fundamental law of
life, which is a law of action” (Matter and Memory 194). But as Bergson states, each
and every feeling “contain[s] the past and present of the being which experiences it”
(Introduction to Metaphysics 23). Thus, it is evident that the maker was merely unaware
of the life of the memory. We may explain his state of consciousness by turning to
Bergson’s differentiation between “two forms of memory” “which are profoundly
distinct” (Matter and Memory 195): spontaneous memory, which “recalls differences,”
and habit memory, which recalls “similarity” (Matter and Memory 201). The latter is
described as “habit rather than memory” because it is oriented towards action: “it acts our past experience but does not call up its image.” The former is understood to be “the true memory” because it truly moves “in the past,” and records all the events that happen in our lives and our psychological states “in the order in which they occur” (*Matter and Memory* 195). It is not surprising why when the maker descended into his “true memory,” it “seemed to him endless.” He was a man who was accustomed to acting according to habit, and had not as yet plumbed the depths of his memory, “continually acting his life instead of truly representing it to himself” (*Matter and Memory* 201). His life of action and his attitude of unquestioning acceptance of “complex stories [and] reality” (292) define his character. However, all this changed with the advance of blindness.

When the maker lived solely in the present by the “law [of] satisfaction and immediate indifference,” he had led a life of busy activity, participating in battles, travelling and taking in the world and its stories. Time had passed quickly, unnoticed as it were. However, as “the splendid universe [gradually] began drawing away from him,” and he realised that he was becoming blind, initially “days and nights” (292) of deep despair engulfed him. “[B]ut one morning he awoke,” states the narrator with empathy, “looked (with calm now) at the blurred things that lay about him, and felt, inexplicably, the way one might feel upon recognising a melody or a voice – that all this had happened to him before, and that he had faced it with fear but also with joy and hopefulness and curiosity” (292-93). These words point to repetition and circular time. Waking up “one morning,” and coming out of “[the] despair of his flesh,” the maker entered the vibrant life of his memory. It led him to realise his powers as a great poet. The two episodes which he recollects from the “vertigo” of his memory help him
recover the spirit of adventure through “the precise flavour” of power and love. They are memories of two life-changing events that took place at night, and “in the darkness of a subterranean crypt,” respectively. The arising of these memories in the maker’s mind when he has become blind foreshadows “the present.” The following narratorial suggestion indicates repetition of experiences in his life: “In this night of his mortal eyes into which he was descending, love and adventure were also awaiting him” (293). The evocative expression in the foregoing quote equating ‘night’ and ‘blindness’ alludes not only to the mutability of the human body, but also to a change in the maker’s experience of time. Further, it signals a change in his attitude to his blindness. Through it, he becomes aware of his memory. He succeeds in “giving himself the intuition of the duration constitutive of his being” (Introduction to Metaphysics 15).

The final passage of the short story describes the maker sensing the return of his creative powers. Further, it strongly suggests repetition and circular time. Apart from revealing that he has come to terms with his blind self, it also indicates that his sense of time has become expansive. Consider the following words: “[N]ow he began to sense (because now he began to be surrounded by) . . . the rumour of the Odysseys and Iliads that it was his fate to sing and to leave echoing in the cupped hands of human memory” (293). The remarkable metaphor of “the cupped hands of human memory” is a tactile image conceived by a blind writer. The blind maker is destined “to sing” his great epics, which would continue to echo in the memory of humankind. Just as the short story “Funes, his Memory” deals with the extraordinary memory of the disabled character Funes, “The Maker” also revolves round the creative power of the maker’s memory. The word ‘echo’ signifies an auditory event, and is appropriate here. The poems that the
maker composes are to be sung; they and their echoing form an intimate part of a blind person’s experiential world.

“[A]nd living consists in growing old” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 11), says Bergson in a crisp definition of living. In a case of sensory ‘compensation,’ Borges, old and blind, remembers how his self was as a younger man by creating paired characters who are auctorial doubles, significantly different in age, bodily abilities, and world view, in the fictional cosmos of the two short stories “The Other” (411-17) and “August 25, 1983” (489-93). Here we may cite Hull’s understanding of his doubled self to suggest that persons who lose their sight later in life tend to have this unsettling experience, and this derives from “a sense of cognitive dissonance” (*Touching the Rock* 144; *On Sight* 128):

I have become separated from my own shadow, as in the cartoons. A quivering image of myself is left behind, while the real me has been blown away by a sudden explosion, which has split me into two images. Each one has a different expression and posture, and is doing different things. I have a double relationship with myself. . . . I was confronted by the first twenty-four years, the childhood and youth of that sighted self, from whom I have now become divided because I am plunged into different ways of knowing my present self. (*Touching the Rock* 144; *On Sight* 128)

The above words describe with poignant exactitude Borges’s predicament. Let us first look at “The Other.” “The essence of time is that it goes by” (*Matter and Memory* 176), says Bergson pithily. The narrator-character of the short story, who is “sitting
comfortably on a bench beside the Charles River” in the city of Cambridge, remarks in the same vein: “Large chunks of ice were floating down the gray current. Inevitably, the river made me think of time...Heraclitus' ancient image” (411). The evocation of the river, whose waters are continuously flowing by, as an “image” symbolising the flow of time, is important because the theme of time is prominently dealt with in this short story. The narrative is replete with references to time. The narrator, who is seventy years old and blind, meets his eighteen-year-old self, a young man, different and not yet blind like his older self. The story brings to life a temporal loop wherein the older self of the man Jorge Luis Borges meets his younger self who will grow old, and will meet his younger self. We have here the ideas of repetition, the double, and the suggestion of never-ending circularity; the meetings between the two selves occurring again and again in cyclical time. Here, the river and, by extension, water can be considered as a symbol for circular time. The following are some points which show that the narrator suggests the same ideas: he has a “sense” that he “had lived this moment before” (411). The other man asks him pertinently how it was that he had forgotten meeting the older self of Borges as a young man in 1918 (415). The narrator’s observation about the young man’s whistling – “I have never been able to carry a tune” – is a hint that “the other man” and “I” (411) are two selves of the same person. He becomes certain of this when he hears the other’s voice – a blind person’s way of recognising people (412). Telling his younger self “‘about my past, which is now the future that awaits you’” (413) – history, both personal and collective – he states:

“As for history ...There was another war, with virtually the same antagonists... England and America battled a German dictator named Hitler—the cyclical Battle of Waterloo. Buenos Aires engendered
another Rosas in 1946, much like our kinsman in the first one. In '55, the province of Córdoba saved us, as Entre Ríos had before. . . .” (413)

In this revelation of the future of the world (for the young man), the narrator suggests that “history” is repetitive and “cyclical” in nature. Talking about books, he asks the other about the works of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and reports that among the works by the Russian novelist the young man had read was The Double (414), a suggestive reference. At one point in their conversation, he declares, “‘...Yesterday's man is not today's, as some Greek said. We two, here on this bench in Geneva or in Cambridge, are perhaps the proof of that’” (italics as in the source, 414). This statement shows that he acknowledges the flow of time, and the ever-changing self of man (and woman). The implication is that the two selves of Borges could “perhaps” be two men with totally different personalities. However, he actually believes that they are two selves of the same man. When a difference of opinion about literature arises between them, he remarks, “A half century does not pass without leaving its mark” (416). Further, regarding the differences in their views on metaphors, he says,

My alter ego believed in the imagination, in creation—in the discovery of new metaphors; I myself believed in those that correspond to close and widely acknowledged likenesses, those our imagination has already accepted: old age and death, dreams and life, the flow of time and water.

I informed the young man of this opinion, which he himself was to express in a book, years later. (italics as in the source, 415)

Listening to what the other was saying, the narrator comes to the following conclusion:

“There was no point in giving advice, no point in arguing, because the young man's
inevitable fate was to be the man that I am now” (416). In Bergson’s terms, the views expressed in the two quotes above attest to the fact that the narrator has intuitively grasped the duration of his self. The metaphors he “believed in” prove this. While being aware of the significant differences in their views, he recognises his past embodied in the young man, who is his “alter ego.” The following remarks point to his awareness of the “survival of the past in the present” (Introduction to Metaphysics 41): “We were too different, yet too alike,” and “We haven't changed a bit, I thought. Always referring back to books” (416). Here the narrator recognises, contra Heraclitus, that although the self is in flux, something fixed remains in selfhood. We may then say in Hagberg’s words that Borges’s “selfhood displays aspects both of fluidity and of fixity that are ungeneralizeable, unsimplifiable” (132). Both narratives featuring doubles of the author demonstrate this understanding.

In the fictional cosmos of both the short stories, the narrators exist in dreams. First, we should observe the following narrative statement from “The Other,” which justifies the above claim: “The other man dreamed me, but did not dream me rigorously” (417). Casting our minds back to the beginning of the narrative, we recall that the narrator began by confessing that he has decided to “write about what happened, [because] people will read it as a story and in time I, too, may be able to see it as one” (411). Since the encounter with his younger self led to his realising that he was dreamt into existence, he desperately wants to convince himself that “what happened” was merely a story and not true. As he remarks to the other man, who has just asserted that he is “‘dreaming you,’” if their encounter is a dream, “‘then each of us does have to think that he alone is the dreamer’” (412). Thus, the narrator wants to believe that he “‘is the dreamer,’” and not the young man. His words, “I spoke to him
while I was awake” (417), may be understood to arise from this desire. Each believes, then, that he “alone” exists in reality, and is therefore in his ‘own time.’ However, it is important to note that the narrator does not possess the silver piece that the other man gave him. So he cannot prove to himself (and to the reader) that he really does exist. In the case of “August 25, 1983,” the key statement is: “Outside awaited other dreams.” The fact that the narrator-character is not, at the end of the short story, in “the hotel in the town of Adrogué” (493) as he asserted earlier in his conversation with his older self 8 shows that he exists in a dream. Further, the title of the short story, which refers to the present – “today” – of the older self of the man Jorge Luis Borges, that is, August 25, 1983 (489), indicates that the dream was dreamt by this man on that date. What constitutes the most telling evidence that this is so is the fact that the older self, who is blind, recognises his younger self as soon as he opens the door to his room and stands in the light (490). The older self knows that his younger self is standing at the door because he is dreaming him.

Dreaming is an important theme in “The Other” as well as in “August 25, 1983.” In the former, the narrator says, “‘[W]hen one wakes up, the person one meets is always oneself. That is what's happening to us now, except that we are two’” (413). They are different but alike. It is in this light that the older self indicates thrice in “August 25, 1983” that they “‘are two yet . . . are one’” (490-91). This is significant because self-recognition is the question at issue here. It is for this reason that there are so many things in both the short stories which act as mirrors – things that reflect. In

8. The temporal loop to be seen in “The Other” is also present in “August 25, 1983” because, in it, as in the former short story, there is a meeting between two selves of Jorge Luis Borges. The idea of circular time is expressed by the older self of Borges when he declares, “the conviction of having already lived each day” (492). Further, both short stories contain references to existence in “two times and two places” (493).
Bergson’s terms, we may say that memory, dreaming, and books of literature play the role of mirrors in the two short stories, showing an ever-changing self and reality. In “The Other,” the narrator states, “My dream . . . has already lasted for seventy years” (413). Life is described metaphorically as a dream in this statement because the person attempting to understand the ever-changing nature of reality and the self undergoes a dream-like experience. Therefore, Bergson insists that “an absolute [such as reality and the self] can only be given in an intuition” (Introduction to Metaphysics 6). That dreaming is related to intuiting the self becomes evident in “August 25, 1983.” There the narrator-character states that on opening the door to Room 19 in the hotel in Adrogué, he encountered himself, older and disabled: “In the pitiless light, I came face to face with myself. There, in the narrow iron bed—older, withered, and very pale—lay I, on my back, my eyes turned up vacantly toward the high plaster mouldings of the ceiling” (489). In directly grasping his self in the dream, Borges realises that he is old and blind. Thus, the process of understanding the self involves recognising bodily deformities, and coming to terms with them.

I have attempted in this chapter to examine how Borges deals with blindness and other deformities in his literary creations, with the objective of showing the complex ways in which disabilities play a role in self-understanding. Bodily deformities are a concrete reminder of the fragility of the human body, and of the continuous change that characterises reality and the self. With the help of Bergson’s insights such as ‘intuition’ and ‘duration,’ I have explored what it means to experience life, which is temporal in nature, in the world as a disabled person. It emerges from the study of the short stories that to “know the duration of the self,” in the case of the disabled characters portrayed therein, is to accept their disabilities and to fashion new lives.
Bergson distrusts concepts (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 48-9). So I have endeavoured to illuminate Borges’s short stories by means of presenting characters, images, and metaphors, thereby attempting to understand Bergson’s philosophy in a creative manner. As we have seen, Borges experiments with a variety of narrative positions in order to problematise the process of self-comprehension and self-presentation. Fictional narratives must necessarily take into account the physical, sensory world. Faced with the paradox of personal loss and artistic imperative, he invents an alternative narrative dynamics based on a creative, tropological use of bodily sensations in acts of recall and imagination.