

An Essay Against Time:

Borges and Benjamin in the Shadow of World War II

I. Introduction: The Problem of Linear Time

The lives of Walter Benjamin and Jorge Luis Borges are often understood in terms of facile dichotomies. Benjamin was a committed Marxist; Borges voiced support for Pinochet. Benjamin was a serial mourner; Borges shunned affect to a fault. Benjamin died young, destitute and unrecognized; Borges' funeral was attended by Argentine dignitaries. The two nevertheless shared the singular fate of writing in the midst of endless catastrophe. They were born seven years apart, began their literary practices under the shadow of the First World War, published career-defining works months removed from the Nazi invasion of Poland, and were deemed political pariahs by their own national governments.

As the atrocities of World War II dragged on, Benjamin and Borges would develop a shared preoccupation with the nature of time itself. Each writer found the concept of linear time — defined as a continuous, unidirectional series of irrecoverable moments — to be a suffocating constraint upon human experience. Benjamin railed against the “empt[iness]” of “temporal continuum” (*Selected Writings* 4: 406-407) while Borges compared the “successive” nature of time to a malignant river or untamed tiger (*Otras inquisiciones* 256). These critiques against time were expanded into two landmark philosophical essays: Benjamin's 1940 work “On the Concept of History,” and Borges' 1947 polemic “Nueva refutación del tiempo.” While these essays have become ubiquitous to the point of near-invisibility, critical literature has largely avoided a direct comparison between the two texts.¹

This is puzzling, given the remarkable correspondences between the projects: they are both linguisti-

¹ Chapter Four of Kate Jenckes' *Reading Borges After Benjamin* offers a rare and illuminating example of comparison between “Nueva refutación” and “On the Concept of History.” My project, however, diverges from Jenckes' in three significant ways. First, Jenckes is interested in Borges and Benjamin's theories of history, while I focus on the nature of time itself. Secondly, while Jenckes is thorough in her analysis of the theoretical implications of “Nueva refutación” and “On the Concept of History,” the chapter lacks any systematic comparison of formal and argumentative strategy in the two works. I establish in this paper, however, that the philosophical content of each essay is inseparable from its approach to using language. Finally, my paper demonstrates the shared theological stakes of “Nueva refutación” and “On the Concept of History,” a quality which is not discussed in *Reading Borges After Benjamin*.

cally daring, theologically-informed attempts to rethink time, performed against the backdrop of a human crisis that had rendered linear understandings of historical progress completely unrecognizable.

In this paper, I analyze the formal and rhetorical strategies of “On the Concept of History” and “Nueva refutación del tiempo,” and establish how these methods stem from each author’s understanding of language, temporality and utopia. I begin by arguing that both Benjamin and Borges frame linear time as a theological problem, one which results from the fallen state of human language. Under this causal relationship between human language and linear time, the task of writing philosophical essays against linear time is reframed as the task of strategically suspending the conventions of human language, thereby offering momentary glimpses of transcendent atemporality. I proceed to show that the particular approaches to quotation and humor displayed in “On the Concept of History” and “Nueva refutación” can best be understood as enactments of such linguistic suspensions. While these two texts are often analyzed for their theoretical content alone, I propose that they are also radical visions of essayistic style based on a Kabbalistic philosophy of language. I conclude by analyzing two fragmented visions of atemporal utopia buried in Benjamin and Borges’ WWII nonfiction, which anticipate a humanity redeemed from its linguistic and temporal constraints.

II. Human Language and Linear Time

While Borges and Benjamin’s World War II output crystallizes around the shared task of deconstructing linear time, the inception of this philosophical undertaking can be traced back to much earlier points in their nonfiction. Over the course of three pivotal essays — Borges’ 1927 treatise “La indagación de la palabra” and Benjamin’s unpublished 1916 papers “On Language as Such and the Language of Man” and “The Role of Language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy” — each author ponders the question of how linear time came to be. I argue that these essays utilize the Biblical Fall to paint

linear time as a theological condemnation, one which stems from a corruption of human language. I then turn to an analysis of Benjamin and Borges' shared interest in a secularized Kabbalah, which provides a framework for linguistic redemption.

Borges' "La indigación" describes the state of human language in decidedly Biblical terms. Initially, the essay appears to be a fairly straightforward work of linguistics, as Borges dedicates meticulous attention to syntactical structures and parts of speech. As it approaches its conclusion, however, a distinctly theological strain enters Borges' thinking. He remarks that "los angeles conversan por especies inteligibles: es decir, por representaciones directas y sin ministerio alguno verbal" (*El idioma* 26).² By comparison, Borges lambastes human beings as "nosotros, los nunca ángeles, los verbales, los que en este bajo, relativo suelo escribimos" (*El idioma* 26).³ Here, Borges suggests that verbal communication is symptomatic of "fallenness": while the heavenly realm of the angels is free from the mediation of language, humanity's position upon "this low, relative ground" requires it to communicate verbally. In short, human language is conceived as a corrupted version of angelic "direct representation." This notion of linguistic "fallenness" is reinforced later in the essay, when Borges evokes the Biblical Fall of Genesis. Towards the end of "La indigación," Borges remarks that our language is "nuestro destino,"⁴ and that we must thus contend with its "concatenación traicionera" (*El idioma* 27).⁵ Given the essay's theological undertones, it is important to note that the descriptor "traicionera" is frequently associated with the Biblical serpent. In comparing linguistic "concatenation" to the fig-

² "The angels converse through intelligible species: that is to say, through direct representation and without any verbal ministry." All Borges translations are mine except otherwise noted.

³ "And us, the never-to-be-angels, the verbal, who on this low, relative earth, write." The line "low, relative earth" is a direct quotation from the Argentine poet Alfafuente; the blurred boundary between quotation and original writing, as discussed later in this paper, will be crucial to Borges' essayistic practice.

⁴ "Our destiny"

⁵ "Traacherous concatenation."

ure of the serpent, Borges paints syntactical succession as a “treacherous” force which has corrupted human language and condemned humanity to a certain “destino.” This destiny, as he will later clarify in “Nueva refutación,” is linear time (*Otras inquisiciones* 256). Thus, after painstakingly analyzing the structure of human language, Borges references Genesis to posit linear time as a product of the “fallen” state of this language.

Whereas Borges’ use of Genesis is allusive, Benjamin’s philosophy of language explicitly centers around an exegetical reading of Genesis. As was the case in “La indigación de la palabra,” Benjamin recasts the Biblical Fall as a linguistic event. “On Language as Such and the Language of Man,” posits that humankind once possessed a “blissful Adamite spirit of language,” one which was created in the “image” of God’s language (*Selected Writings* 1: 71). This “paradisiacal language” consisted solely of “names,” which humans utilized to “know” the created world around them (*Selected Writings* 1: 73). When “Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field” (*King James Bible*, Gen. 2:20), Benjamin theorizes that he is cognizing animals through name in a manner which mirrors God’s creation of animals through speech. A defining quality of names is that they are purely descriptive; as a result, “paradisiacal language” is one which lacks the capacity to judge. This leads Benjamin to interpret Adam and Eve’s acceptance of the forbidden fruit as a misguided attempt to stray beyond the boundaries of the language of names. As Benjamin puts it, “Knowledge of good and evil abandons name; it is a knowledge from outside, the uncreated imitation of the creative word. Name steps outside itself in this knowledge: the Fall marks the birth of the human word” (*Selected Writings* 1: 71). Benjamin explains that this new “human word” takes on the form of an arbitrary sign rather than an immanently meaningful name (*Selected Writings* 1: 71).

The “fall” of humanity’s relationship to language, however, also leads to a secondary “fall” in its relationship with time. Benjamin remarks that the perfection of nature is “betrayed by language”

and “a new world...of unfeeling historical time” emerges in its place (*Origin of the German Trauerspiel* 269). Hence, the “empty,” and “unfeeling” continuum of historical time, which Benjamin critiques in “On the Concept of History,” is traced back to humanity’s betrayal of its original relationship with the language of names.⁶

At first glance, it appears that Borges and Benjamin have painted themselves into an impossible corner: if we are condemned to linear time by our language, what is the point of attempting to write against linear time at all?

I argue that Benjamin and Borges’ shared theological interest in Kabbalah provides a model for transcending linear time through linguistic disruption. In Judaism, Kabbalah refers to the practice of intuiting divine wisdom by means of mystical analysis of sacred texts. Benjamin and Borges both developed a keen interest in Kabbalistic practice during World War II; the critic George Steiner goes as far as to refer to Benjamin, Borges and Gershom Scholem as the “[three] modern Kabbalists” (*After Babel* 129). Despite Steiner’s use of the term “Kabbalists,” it is important to clarify that neither Borges nor Benjamin was particularly dogmatic in their approach. As Scholem states in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, the contemporary relevance of Kabbalah is found not in its ritualistic “forms,” but rather “the attempt to discover the hidden life beneath the external shapes of reality and to make visible that abyss in which the symbolic nature of all that exists reveals itself” (Scholem 38). “Modern Kabbalah,” therefore, shifts its emphasis from esoteric practice towards faith in a transcendent dimension of hidden reality which can be “symbolically” accessed through language.

⁶ Although I contend that biographical considerations have often played an outsize role in readings of Benjamin, one cannot help but notice the timing of these two essays: “The Role of Language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy,” which posits the origins of linear time, emerges in the midst of World War I; “On the Concept of History,” which turns a wary but prophetic gaze towards humanity’s redemption from linear time, arises during World War II. We can say that crisis compelled Benjamin to conclude a line of thinking he had begun twenty-four years ago.

Under this reorientation, Borges and Benjamin reinterpret Kabbalah as a linguistic — rather than religious — undertaking. One core tenet of Kabbalah is the acceptance of a transcendent dimension of language, which humanity “lost” after the Fall (Fishburn 410). According to doctrine, knowledge of this linguistic dimension allowed early humanity to experience the eternal and atemporal (Fishburn 410). Despite the traumatic “forgetting” which accompanied the Fall, adherents of Kabbalah maintain that traces of transcendent language still underpin modern human language. In fact, the transcendent “name of God” functions in Kabbalah as the “metaphysical origin” of all human communication (Handelman 76-77). The Kabbalist therefore posits that a sacred dimension of language can be obliquely accessed by means of “creative misreading,” in which religious texts are read against the grain of linguistic conventions (Fishburn 415). If we were to secularize this idea, we can reformulate Kabbalistic reading as the task of briefly escaping our linguistically-mandated linear temporality by entering into a radically subversive relationship to our everyday language. The Kabbalistic task of finding the hidden name of God is thus reframed for Borges and Benjamin as the literary task of finding transcendent possibilities in the midst of our fallen language.

I conclude that this understanding of Kabbalah is crucial to Borges and Benjamin’s World War II essays, as it proposes that one can gain insight into the eternal by subjecting human language to calculated acts of subversion. While Kabbalah affirms that the fullness of the eternal can never be revealed through human language, linguistic subversions can offer fragmentary “glimpses” of the atemporal origins of the human word. Similarly, Benjamin and Borges seek to affirm the existence of a transcendent, non-linear relationship to time by way of linguistic experimentation. The task of “writing against time,” therefore, must necessarily take the form of a paradoxical endeavor: one must utilize human language, but enter into a particular relationship with said language that internally dismantles its conventions. In the following section, I argue that “On the Concept of History” and

“Nueva refutación del tiempo” put forward specific methods that demonstrate how the philosophical essay can achieve this ambition.

III. Strategies Against Time

“Nueva refutación del tiempo” and “On the Concept of History” both fall into the category of the philosophical essay: they take up a metaphysical position — namely the refutation of linear time — and proceed to defend its validity. However, even a cursory glance at either essay reveals a radical break from the conventions of philosophical and academic writing. Both works are beset by tangential remarks, resist any kind of logical cohesion, and deploy unmarked quotations without explanation. Benjamin and Borges saw the essay as an arena for radical formal experimentation, and the philosophical essay was certainly not exempt from this anarchistic attitude.⁷ The formal irreverence mirrors Benjamin and Borges’ personal relationship to academia; despite the metaphysical concerns that undergird their writing, the two never broke beyond the fringes of the philosophical academy. This assessment is valid even to this day, where Benjamin and Borges occupy a limbo between philosophy and literature. “Nueva refutación” and “On the Concept of History,” however, see the two writers taking advantage of their outsider status to approach philosophical writing in a manner that would have been deemed academically sacrilegious.

The divergent linguistic philosophies of Benjamin and Borges and the academic establishment would naturally lead to two very different approaches to philosophical argumentation. For the structuralist or analytic philosopher, language is simply a systematic means of communicating a pre-

⁷ Kate Jenckes remarks that the term “ensayo” has the dual meaning of written text and “attempt,” and contends that Borges embodied this linguistic slippage in his practice. His essays, therefore “represent a series of attempts” rather than complete, self-contained texts which have achieved their intended goals (Jenckes 47). Susan Handelman identifies a similar strain of formal risk and experimentation in Benjamin’s essays, noting that it is nearly impossible to “paraphrase” him as a result (Jenckes 23).

existing argument.⁸ In Kabbalah, however, language is not merely an empty medium of thought, but also a source of “ecstatic experience” (Handelman 95) A philosophical argument against time, therefore, is not communicated *through* language, but is *experienced in* moments where human linguistic conventions fall apart.⁹ Under this mandate, the task of crafting philosophical essays against linear time requires the writer to conceptualize and deploy formal “strategies” which can enact — rather than merely explain — temporal suspension.

In the following sections, I examine two such strategies which take on pivotal roles within “Nueva refutación” and “On the Concept of History”: quotation and humor. The overarching goal of quotation and humor in these two essays is identical — to momentarily complicate our traditional relationship to language in order to elucidate a realm beyond linear time.

Quotation as a Linguistically Subversive Act

According to Hannah Arendt, “quotations are at the center of every work of Benjamin’s” after 1924 (Arendt 202). Arendt is correct to note the centrality of quotation in Benjamin’s later thinking; in fact, his obsession with textual fragments would progress to the point that it threatened his academic livelihood (*Selected Writings* 4: 431). While *The Arcades Project* is traditionally upheld as the exemplar of Benjamin’s theory of quotation in practice, I argue that the epigraphs of “On the Concept of History” beautifully illustrate his unique strategy of quotation. “On the Concept of History” utilizes what I call “hollowed-out quotations” to momentarily dismantle the referential quality of human language, leading to a brief return to the atemporal language of names.

⁸ Borges and Benjamin’s essays coincide with the rise of both structural linguistics and analytic philosophy. Both systems posit that human language is reducible to an essential system of relations, whether they are anthropological, symbolic, or logical.

⁹ As Borges notes in “Nueva refutación,” it is only when the capacity to verbalize thought breaks down that we become “possessors of the inconceivable word eternity” (*Otras inquisiciones* 246).

“On the Concept of History” consists of eighteen theses, many of which are preceded by brief, fragmentary epigraphs taken from the likes of Nietzsche and Scholem. In deploying epigraphs, Benjamin alludes to a long-established tradition in German philosophical writing (Ziolkowski 522); however, whereas the conventional epigraph introduces and frames an entire work, Benjamin reimagines the epigraph as a physical interruption within the work. In fact, the six separate epigraphs he intersperses into “On the Concept of History” serve the spatial function of breaking apart Benjamin’s prose on the page. In a decision which flaunts the academic mantra of “seamlessly” incorporating quoted material into authorial text, Benjamin’s epigraphs quite literally “hover over” his text. Due to their brevity, it is almost impossible to deduce the larger context that these epigraphs are extracted from; at the same time, the quotation has not yet assumed a new meaning under Benjamin’s thought. Take, for instance, the word “vale” in “Consider the darkness and the great cold/In this vale resounding with mystery” which serves as the transition between Theses VI and VII (*Selected Writings* 4: 391). Upon first encountering the quotation, the reader is given no information as to what “the vale” refers to in the context of Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera*, from which the line was taken. At the same time, “the vale” does not yet possess a metaphorical function within Benjamin’s own argument, as he deliberately elides any explanation that might harmonize the quoted and non-quoted material. Thus, the “vale” is briefly lost between incoming and disappearing contexts.

Benjamin’s epigraphs, therefore, temporarily suspend the referentiality of human language. In his contemporaneous writing about the cinema, Benjamin voices his fascination at the ability for abrupt transitions to “shock” an audience from its passive relationship to the image (*Selected Writings* 4: 269); similarly, interruptive epigraphs “shock” readers into a new relationship with language. While the reader attempts to assign symbolic value to “the vale,” the word does not point to anything but itself. Consequently, we are forced to encounter the quotation as a collection of “names [which]

stand alone and expressionless” rather than as an expressive sign (*Selected Writings* 2: 454). In Benjamin’s view, the brief bewilderment we face at the epigraph’s lack of reference can be understood as the shock of momentarily breaking from our linguistic preconceptions.

This break from conventional language serves the function of simulating “paradisiacal language.” Hannah Arendt explains that Benjamin’s fascination with quotation is rooted in his account of naming in Genesis; as discussed earlier, Benjamin maintains that the original form of human language consisted entirely of names rather than referential symbols. Thus, human language once espoused a radically different approach to knowledge: the word did not refer to a piece of external knowledge, but instead possessed an “immanent magic” that could convey knowledge without reference (*Selected Writings* 1: 71). Arendt contends that “for Benjamin, to quote is to name” (Arendt 203). By prioritizing the word itself, rather than its referent, Benjamin’s quotations force us to experience language in a way that mimics a lost relationship to knowledge.

Benjamin elaborates that quotation achieves this restoration of names through a violent erasure of context. Traditionally, the quotation is seen as a site of infinite re-contextualization. Quotation, in effect, allows for the free movement of language between its original context and an infinite number of hypertextual contexts.¹⁰ Benjamin, however, is not interested in quotation’s ability to shed original context for new context; instead, he is enraptured by the temporal gap that exists *between* original and new contexts, a gap in which the quoted material is radically devoid of meaning.

This approach to quotation alludes to Benjamin’s theory of “hollowed-out things,” miscellaneous objects which have lost their original use value but have not been repurposed for new uses. For Benjamin, the hollowed-out thing is suspended between “incoming and disappearing meaning,” and

¹⁰ As Jacques Derrida notes, “Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written... can be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable” (Derrida 12).

this liminal state of non-meaning allows us to access its “truth” (*The Arcades Project* 466). I argue that the epigraphs in “On the Concept of History” are best understood as “hollowed-out quotations” that are caught between “disappearing” hypotextual meaning and “incoming” hypertextual meaning. In this hollowed-out state, the words of the quotation fail to refer to anything within the original or new texts; in effect, the hollowed-out quotation temporarily abandons the external reference of human language and takes on the quality of a name. Benjamin himself refers to this phenomenon in the essay “Karl Kraus,” where he states that quotation “summons the word by its name [and] wrenches it destructively from its context” (*Selected Writings* 2: 454). Of course, this gap can never be permanent; as the reader takes in Benjamin’s theses, the quotation will inevitably be given a new context, and thus will acquire a new meaning.

Like Benjamin’s historical materialist, who subverts linear time by bringing the “transition” of historical moments into a “standstill,” the essayist deploys hollowed-out quotations to bring the transition between linguistic meanings to a standstill (*Selected Writings* 4: 396). Within this standstill, we are given a fleeting glimpse of a transcendently immanent language. Symbolic language posits a linear temporality between word and knowledge — the word must first refer to some external entity before knowledge can be transmitted. Paradise, however, was a place in which word and knowledge were simultaneous: to name was to know, and to know was to be able to name (*Selected Writings* 1: 71). The effect of returning to a paradisiacal language, therefore, is an experience of knowledge that is “immediate” in both senses: free from linguistic mediation, but also instantaneous rather than successive.¹¹

¹¹ When Benjamin states in “On Language as Such” that the Word of God is “expressly immediate,” he uses the German *unmittelbare*. As is the case in the English translation, this term carries the double meaning of unmediated and instantaneous.

Like the epigraphs of “On the Concept of History,” the quotations of “Nueva refutación” disrupt the traditional relationship between language and knowledge in order to offer glimpses of a non-linear temporality. Benjamin’s quotation interrupts the external referentiality of language to offer a glimpse of paradisiacal names. Borges’ quotation, on the other hand, interrupts the implicit subjectivity of language to offer a glimpse of cyclical, non-individuated time.

In traditional philosophical essays, quotation carves out the authorial subject’s place within an intellectual lineage.¹² Quoted material is valued insofar as it offers a “documentation” of past opinions, allowing the author to position their own work as a response and improvement upon the writing that has preceded it (Arendt 202). Marjorie Garber echoes this claim when she suggests that the quoting subject “appears in the act of quoting to have virtually incorporated the predecessor” (Garber 658). Traditional quotation, therefore, solidifies the mythos of writing as a linear act — a piece of writing utilizes quotation to “document” and “incorporate” its predecessors, so that it can build upon this foundation to offer a novel argument to the future.

Instead of utilizing quotation to affirm the originality of his argument, Borges’ quotations negate his own authorial subjectivity. In theory, the act of quotation appears to reaffirm Borges’ aforementioned claim that human language suffers from a “concatenación traicionera,” as it imposes a “treacherous” chain-link model to writing. Through the quotation, we are led to believe, the author builds upon past writing and leaves behind material that can itself be quoted in the future. Borges, however, parodies this linearizing function of quotation in “Nueva refutación.” After engaging in meticulous explications of British idealism, Borges begins the conclusion of his essay with the phrase “Por la dialéctica de Berkeley y de Hume he arribado al dictamen” (*Otras inquisiciones* 255).¹³

¹² Hannah Arendt notes that in conventional academic prose, “it is the function of quotations to verify and document opinions, wherefore they can safely be relegated to Notes” (Arendt 202).

¹³ “Through the dialectic of Berkeley and Hume I have arrived at the opinion”

Here, Borges adopts the trappings and phraseology of linear intellectual history; he has “documented” the writing of the past, subjected it to a creative “dialectic,” and has synthesized what has come before him into a “dictamen”¹⁴ he can offer to the future. The “dictamen” that he arrives at, however, is not his own. Instead, he simply quotes a Schopenhauer passage at length, a decision that immediately subverts the first person subjectivity implied by “he arribado.” Simply put, quotation blurs the boundaries between what is Borges’ own voice and what is not.

Borges then proceeds to negate even the novelty of Schopenhauer’s quotation by remarking that “Un tratado budista del siglo V, el *Visuddhimagga* (*Camino de la Pureza*), ilustra la misma doctrina con la misma figura” (*Otras inquisiciones* 255).¹⁵ The use of “la misma” emphasizes that Schopenhauer’s thinking — and by extension Borges’ thinking — is not an improvement upon the ideas Buddhaghosa evinces in the *Visuddhimagga*. Instead, they are an identical reiteration. In a final act of subversion, Borges introduces yet another quotation from Plutarch, which predates the *Visuddhimagga* by about three centuries but contains many of the same concepts (*Otras inquisiciones* 255).

In the quoted sections of *The World as Will and Representation* and the *Visuddhimagga*, the linear model of knowledge is supplanted by a cyclical model. The aforementioned “dictamen de Schopenhauer” posits that the objective world is temporal in its form, and that the nature of this temporality resembles a “eternally revolving circle” (*Otras inquisiciones* 255). Since our experience of the world is necessarily grounded in the present moment, the subject can only cognize the world by momentarily bringing the cycle of time to a pause. Thus, Schopenhauer’s “knowing subject” does not persist through time; instead, each “knowing subject” is an instantaneous creation within the infinite cycle of temporality. Buddhaghosa echoes this idea when he remarks that “Como una rueda de carru-

¹⁴ “Opinion”

¹⁵ “A Buddhist treatise from the fifth century, the *Visuddhimagga* (*The Path of Purification*), illustrates the same doctrine using the same figure.”

aje, al rodar, toca la tierra en un solo punto, dura la vida lo que dura una sola idea” (*Otras inquisiciones* 255).¹⁶ Here, the image of wheel is once again used to illustrate the transience of the knowing subject, who can only last the duration of a “single idea.” Under the metaphysical model of Schopenhauer and Buddhaghosa, knowing subjects cannot build upon previous knowledge in an everlasting chain; instead, each piece of knowledge is a momentary iteration within a ceaseless cycle of recurrence.¹⁷ If we subscribe to this epistemological understanding, in which every “new” doctrine and discovery is in fact part of a single cycle, it is inevitable that we unwittingly echo past thinking.

Borges’ quotations serve as linguistic manifestations of this cyclical conception of knowledge. While his initial “dialectic” of quotations from Berkeley and Hume suggests that knowledge develops linearly, he abandons this argumentative course altogether, and instead foregrounds quoted material that underscores the redundancy of his claims. To return to Garber, Borges does not present quoted material in order to “incorporate” the past. On the contrary, each intertext only serves to establish that his supposedly “new refutation” of time is yet another iteration of an idea that has already been expressed countless times under the guise of different authors. Quotation, therefore, becomes a linguistic strategy that deliberately complicates Borges’ own position within the lineage of writing. He is no longer a temporally-situated authorial subject who stands *after* and *above* the texts he quotes; instead, he is simply one of many manifestations of the same, eternally-recurring “knowing subject.” Consequently, the hierarchy that is traditionally assumed between the quoting subject and quoting texts dissipates. Borges has, to quote the Angelus Silesius passage which concludes “Nueva refutación,” “become the writing” he has cited (*Otras inquisiciones* 257).

¹⁶ “Just like the wheel of a carriage, which only touches the earth at one point as it rolls, life lasts the duration of a single idea.”

¹⁷ This metaphysical system is deeply informed by Borges’ growing interest in Buddhism, and how its rejection of the persistent subject complicated, in his view, basic tenets of Western experience. See “La personalidad y el Buddha” (1950).

Cosmic Humor

One continuously overlooked quality of Benjamin and Borges' World War II nonfiction is the centrality of humor. While their historical context appears to all but necessitate melancholy, both "On the Concept of History" and "Nueva refutación del tiempo" contain moments of unexpected levity. In fact, both "Nueva refutación" and "On the Concept of History" explicitly acknowledge the inseparability of humor from their philosophical argument: Benjamin remarks in Thesis IV that the spiritual is "alive in [class struggle] as confidence, courage, *humor*, cunning, and fortitude, and have effects that reach far back into the past" (*Selected Writings* 4: 390, emphasis my own). Similarly, Borges writes in the introduction to "Nueva refutación" that "no exagero la importancia de ...juegos verbales" (*Otras inquisiciones* 236).¹⁸ In this section, I will argue that both "On the Concept of History" and "Nueva refutación" employ a specific brand of humor, one which arises as a byproduct of human language attempting to step beyond its own boundaries. "Nueva refutación" derives much of its humor by forcing linguistic conventions into self-contradiction, while "On the Concept of History" relies on incongruous juxtapositions between divine concepts and pedestrian language. Ultimately, however, both Borges and Benjamin understand humor as a deliberate breakdown in communication which grants temporary escape from the linear temporality of the human perspective.

Over the course of its reception, the sincerity of "Nueva refutación del tiempo" has often been called into question. Kate Jenckes, for instance, refers to the essay as an exercise in "mock refut[ation]" (Jenckes 104). This interpretation is more than understandable, given the intensely self-aware and deliberately paradoxical quality of the prose. The title itself — which uses the temporal adjective "nueva" to describe a negation of temporality — is a blatant contradiction, something Borges acknowledges in the opening paragraph as a "ligerísima burla" (*Otras inquisiciones* 236). This phrase

¹⁸ "I do not exaggerate the importance of...word games."

can be translated as either “the lightest of jokes” or “the lightest of tricks,” and the duality of valences is crucial to understanding the larger project of Borges’ humor: Borges indeed makes jokes throughout the essay, but these jokes can also be understood as deliberate “tricks” played upon the systems of language. Borges deploys another joke/trick later on in the essay, when he states “Lo repito: no hay detrás de las caras un yo secreto, que gobierna los actos y que recibe las impresiones; somos únicamente la serie de esos actos imaginarios y de esas impresiones errantes” (*Otras inquisiciones* 240-241).¹⁹ The humor here lies in a disjunction between the sentence’s grammatical construction and its content: while it attempts to negate the existence of stable subjects, the sentence conveys this idea through the use of first person constructions (“Lo repito” (*I repeat* this) and “somos únicamente la serie de esos actos” (*We are* nothing more than a series of these acts)). Even the structure of the essay itself is humorous, as Borges deliberately includes both an original and revised version of the opening paragraphs. The act of editing and revision is, of course, a fundamentally temporal process; while the content of essay attempts to disprove time, Borges chooses to expose how the essay itself evolved over time.

What, then, is the methodological strategy which unites these joke/tricks?

Borgesian humor arises when a concept is misapplied to its object, leading to an incongruence. Here, I follow Rosa Pellicer, who has noted that Borgesian humor rests upon “incongruences” (Pellicer 33). She notes that Borges had a particular interest in Schopenhauer’s conception of comedy, which states that all laughter arises from the sudden realization of a disjunction between a concept and a real world object (Pellicer 32-34). For Borges, human language itself is laden with concepts (such as “el concepto de sucesión”²⁰) which are “inseparable” from its constitution (*Otras inquisiciones* 248).

Thus, the joke/tricks in “Nueva refutación” arise when an underlying concept of hu-

¹⁹ “I repeat this: there does not lie behind the face a secret “I” which governs action and receive impressions: we are nothing more than a series of such imaginary acts and errant impressions.”

²⁰ “The concept of succession”

man language clashes with what the language is attempting to represent. Take, for example, the aforementioned joke about “Lo repito.” Here, the concepts of first-person subjectivity, which are embedded into the verb conjugations and syntax of human language, are used to describe the notion of non-subjectivity. The linguistic concept is woefully misapplied to its object, and the strained attempt at communication produces a comedic incongruence. The humor of the title “Nueva refutación” follows a similar formula. Our approach to written language, specifically academic writing, is suffused with the concept of novelty and succession: we speak of new releases, first and second drafts, and updated editions. Thus, when academic language attempts to capture atemporality, an incongruence arises between the linguistic concept of novelty and the act of refuting time. Put differently, Borges’ humor can be understood as illuminating failures of language: a linguistic construction attempts to capture something it cannot, and in doing so, exposes the conceptual underpinnings of human language.

While it is possible to view these linguistic breakdowns as “mockeries” of linguistic conventions, I argue that they serve a redemptive function in Borges’ thought. In order to grasp the full stakes of Borgesian humor, we must turn to a much earlier publication, 1927’s “Quevedo humorista.” Here, Borges offers the following explication of Francisco de Quevedo’s strategy of humor. “La frase humorística de Quevedo es una continuada evasión, un no satisfacer nunca la expectativa, un cambiar de vereda incansablemente...” (*Textos recobrados* 288).²¹ Like Quevedo, Borges’ humor relies upon sentences which continually “evade” meaning by subverting the expectations of human language. In describing Quevedo, however, Borges ascribes a transcendent “virtue” to his humor: “Otra virtud mejor hay en ella: su liberación de la ley causal, su ambiente de atropellado milagro, su travesura. Quevedo

²¹ “Quevedo’s humorous sentence is a continuous evasion, one which never satisfies expectations, a tireless changing of paths.”

nos promete cielo con su reír” (*Textos recobrados* 288).²² In using the rules and expectations of language against itself, Quevedo is able to momentarily suspend the laws of causality. As stated earlier, Borges identifies causal succession as the key feature of human language which condemns us to linear time. Quevedo’s humor, therefore, is achieving nothing short of a temporary lapse in human language, and with it, human time.

Put differently, Borgesian humor possesses a theological capacity to affirm the existence of a transcendent temporality. When speaking of Quevedo’s jokes, Borges displays a religious reverence, referring to them as “hasty miracles.” The religious implications of Quevedo’s humor is further reinforced in Borges’ claim that “Quevedo nos promete cielo con su reír” (*Textos recobrados* 288). This sentence evokes an aforementioned line from “Indigación de la palabra,” which was also written in 1927: “los que en este bajo, relativo suelo escribimos” (*El idioma* 26). The contrast between “cielo” and “suelo” is striking: while writing usually condemns us to the “earthliness” of human language, humor serves as an exception which “hastily” reveals the heavenly, non-verbal realm of the angels. Quevedo’s humor therefore clarifies the theological stakes of Borges’ humor — by forcing the successive syntax of human language to a halt, Borges’ “burlas” allow for a “hasty yet miraculous” glimpse of a “cielo” free from both successive language and linear time.

Like Borges, Benjamin frames humor as an interruption of human perspective. While Borges is frequently characterized as an ironist, critical work on Benjamin’s prose tends to zero in on either its pervasive melancholy or the stubborn sincerity of his theological commitments. Humor, on the other hand, is often characterized as completely foreign to his practice, to the point where the image

²² “A still higher virtue is to be found in it: its liberation from the law of causality, its atmosphere of hasty miracle, its mischief. Quevedo promises us heaven with his laugh.”

of a laughing Benjamin seems almost oxymoronic.²³ Benjamin's WWII-era thinking, however, was marked by a deep fascination in humor and its redemptive potential. As was the case in Borges, humor carried profound theological implications for Benjamin; he notes in a letter to Scholem, for instance, that understanding Kafka requires "extract[ing] from Jewish theology its comic side" (*Selected Writings* 4: 433). Just as Borges' theories on theological humor can be accessed through his readings of Quevedo, Benjamin constructs a philosophy of theological humor around his interpretations of the writer Paul Scheerbart. These observations are distilled in a brief and easily-overlooked 1940 essay entitled "On Scheerbart."

"On Scheerbart" centers around a single joke Scheerbart makes in August of 1914, mere weeks after the outbreak of the First World War — the timing alludes to Benjamin's own historical position, as he penned his essay in the early months of World War II. This joke, which Benjamin claims is "engraved in my memory," proceeds as follows: "Let me protest first against the expression 'world war.' I am sure that no heavenly body, however near, will involve itself in the affair in which we are embroiled. Everything leads me to believe that deep peace still reigns in interstellar space" (*Selected Writings* 4: 386). The humor here is derived from the fact that "world war" can be used to describe both a war *within* the world and a war *between* worlds. Human language is predisposed towards the first reading, as it is difficult to imagine any spatial realm beyond our immediate terrestrial "world." Scheerbart, however, opts for the second reading, in which Earth is viewed as one of many worlds. While the set up of the joke — "Let me protest first against the expression 'world war.'" — suggests it will be topical, the punchline is delivered from a cosmic, atemporal perspective (*Selected Writings* 4: 386). As Benjamin notes, Scheerbart is "one of those humorists who, like Lichtenberg or Jean Paul,

²³ Adriana Bontea examines Benjamin's critique of comedic drama in "A Project In Its Context: Walter Benjamin on Comedy," but does not find Benjamin's own practice to be comedic. Peter Banki briefly discusses the relationship between comedy and redemption in Benjamin's writing on Hassidism in "Humour as the Inverted Sublime: Jean Paul's Laughter Within Limitations."

seem never to forget that the earth is a heavenly body” (*Selected Writings* 4: 387). In a moment of crisis that seems to extend infinitely in all directions, Scheerbart’s joke invites the reader to step away from “the world” altogether, and thus affirms a perspective which transcends humanity’s present situation.

As was the case in Quevedo, Scheerbart’s jokes rely upon a linguistic failure, specifically the ambiguity of the phrase “world war.” Scheerbart therefore epitomizes Benjamin’s claim that “laughter is shattered articulation” (*Arcades Project* 325). This form of humor — in which the human and cosmic are linguistically juxtaposed to an incongruous effect — is not without precedent in Benjamin’s writing. One can turn, for instance, to Benjamin’s essay “Hashish in Marseilles,” in which he recounts his experiences with the titular drug. Here, Benjamin offers a comedic account of entering a Marseilles restaurant with a ravenous hunger. He describes being overcome by a “beatific humor,” which he “feels...infinitely when I am told at the Restaurant Basso that the hot kitchen has just been closed, while I have just sat down to feast into eternity” (*On Hashish* 49). Once again, the “beatific humor” of this moment is derived from a disjunction between the divine transcendence of “feasting into eternity” and the worldliness of missing a restaurant’s hours of service, the epitome of a petty bourgeois inconvenience.

“On the Concept of History” builds upon both Scheerbart and “Hashish in Marseilles,” espousing a strategy of humor which derives laughter by alternating cosmic and terrestrial perspectives. The opening lines of the first thesis offer a key to reading the entire essay’s approach to humor: “theology, which today, as we know...is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight” (*Selected Writings* 4: 389). While theological concepts are often associated with vastness, Benjamin filters them through the “small ugliness” of human experience. Consider, for instance, the following line in the unpublished Theses C: “Eternal recurrence is the punishment of being held back in school, projected onto the

cosmic sphere” (*Selected Writings* 4: 403). Here, the cosmic absurdity of eternal recurrence is likened to the triviality of school punishment. A similar strategy is employed in Thesis III, where Benjamin states “Each moment [humanity] has lived becomes a *citation a l'ordre du jour*. And that day is Judgment Day” (*Selected Writings* 4: 390). *Citation a l'ordre du jour* is a French term which refers to a military dispatch (*Selected Writings* 4: 398); the first sentence’s explicit evocation of wartime imagery, therefore, is abruptly put into cosmic perspective by the apocalyptic evocation of Judgment Day.

In both jokes, Benjamin superimposes a divine perspective upon a human perspective in a manner which results in “shattered articulation.” We strain to understand the gravity of “eternal recurrence” by means of grade-school punishment, just as we strain to understand the theological justice of “Judgment Day” through the banal violence of a military dispatch. Like Borges’ joke/tricks, which expose the limitations of human language in moments of communicative failure, Benjamin’s humor mocks the inadequacy of human metaphors as they strain to capture the transcendent. This refers back to Benjamin’s interest in Kabbalah, which proposes that true theological knowledge is impossible under the limits of the human word.

However, each joke ultimately enacts a Scheerbartian redefinition, in which contemporary events are considered from the vantage point of a redeemed humanity. As discussed earlier, a key moment in Scheerbart’s joke arrives when the reader is forced to go back and redefine “world war” as a “war between worlds.” The “shattered articulation” of humor leads us to consider the crisis of World War I in a cosmic context, *as if* we have transcended space and time. Benjamin remarks that while Scheerbart offered a “mockery of present-day humanity,” this mocking was done with a simultaneous “faith in a humanity of the future” (*Selected Writings* 4: 387). In other words, when we redefine “world war,” Benjamin contends we are briefly assuming the vantage point of the “future human,” who has been liberated from the constraints of linear temporality and terrestrial space. This idea re-

flects a key section of “On the Concept of History,” in which Benjamin claims that our “empty homogenous time” is nevertheless “shot through” with moments of Messianic redemption (*Selected Writings* 4: 397). Put differently, present humanity already has oblique access to its redeemed state, in which a Messianic event has brought linear time to a halt. Therefore, when Benjamin’s jokes implore us to redefine classroom punishment as a form of “eternal recurrence,” or to re-define “*citation a l’ordre du jour*” as a form of apocalyptic justice, we fleetingly gaze upon our present reality from the perspective of a post-temporal humanity.

Just as Borges’ jokes offer a glimpse of the “cielo,” Benjamin’s humor disrupts language to offer a fragmented premonition of a humanity redeemed from linear time. This intersection points towards a distinctly prophetic strain in both “Nueva refutación” and “On the Concept of History.” For Benjamin and Borges, the philosophical essay simultaneously looks back to a lost dimension of language, while anticipating the shape of a redeemed language to come.

IV. Conclusion: Temporal Refutation, Mourning and the Utopian Imagination

“Nueva refutación del tiempo” and “On the Concept of History” represent culminating moments in Benjamin and Borges’ shared task of refuting linear time. Since temporal linearity is an outcome of human language, the task of temporal refutation necessitates a radicalization of language through calculated strategies. The refutation of time is also a revelatory act; it gazes backward towards the lost dimension of eternity, but in doing so it inevitably gazes forward to an oblique vision of utopia, in which humanity has been liberated from its linear relationship to time.

The World War II essays of Benjamin and Borges include two conjectures of what such a post-temporal utopia might look like. Neither author displays much confidence in their hypothesis: Benjamin confines his to the notes of “On the Concept of History,” while Borges — in typical fashion — refuses to endorse the veracity of his claims.

It is unlikely that either Borges or Benjamin truly subscribed to the actuality of their utopian visions. After all, neither writer is believed to have been committed to any religious or spiritual doctrine.²⁴ For Borges and Benjamin, religion and metaphysics were not valued as positive affirmations of truth, but rather negatively, as disruptive tools which could temporarily upset our traditional concepts of time and language to offer fragmentary glimpses of the eternal and linguistically transcendent. The decidedly theological character of their thinking, therefore, should not be understood as unequivocal endorsements of a faith structure. Instead, theology's function lies in its capacity to imagine a transcendent relationship to time, as well as a transcendent language which could speak of such temporality.²⁵

Borges' tentative vision of utopia can be found in his essay "El tiempo y J. W. Dunne." After discussing Dunne's philosophy of time, Borges concludes that Dunne's conception of the eternal afterlife is "una tesis tan espléndida," to the point that it renders his rational doubts meaningless (*Otras inquisiciones* 35).²⁶ Dunne's eternity is one in which "Recobramos todos los instantes de nuestra vida y los combinaremos como nos plazca. Dios y nuestros amigos y Shakespeare colaborarán con nosotros" (*Otras inquisiciones* 35).²⁷ Thus, once we transcend linear time, Borges imagines that every moment of our lives will be made accessible to us. Furthermore, since we are free from the "treacher-

²⁴ The introduction to James McBride's "Marooned in the Realm of the Profane: Walter Benjamin's Synthesis of Kabbalah and Communism," offers a fairly comprehensive literature review on the question of Benjamin's faith. Many scholars posit that Benjamin's belief system constantly fluctuated between Marxist secularism and Messianic Judaism, without fully resolving towards either doctrine. Similarly, "En Qué Creía Borges?" by Juan Jacinto Muñoz Rengel depicts Borges' relationship to Christianity and Judaism as non-committal and "pantheistic." While the task of fully reconstructing a historical figure's religious beliefs is impossible, all evidence points to the fact that neither Borges nor Benjamin subscribed to any totalizing set of convictions.

²⁵ The reframing of theology as an imaginative enterprise evokes J. W. Dunne's vision of God as a creative collaborator, a theory which pleases Borges in "El tiempo y J. W. Dunne."

²⁶ "A thesis so splendid"

²⁷ "We will recover all of the instants of our lives and combine them as we please. God and our friends and Shakespeare will collaborate with us."

ous concatenation” of human language, we can joyously recombine and re-narrativize these moments as we see fit. Borgesian utopia is not a Platonic “museum of forms”²⁸; instead, it is a public playground, where we will “combinar [los momentos de nuestro vida] como nos plazca” alongside God, Shakespeare, and our friends.

If Borges’ utopia is defined by a playful manipulation of temporal moments, Benjamin’s is marked by a sense of profound relaxation. In the unpublished “New Theses K,” Benjamin imagines a “messianic world,” in which “a universal history exist[s]. Not as written history, but as festively enacted history.” Once linear time is abolished, Benjamin suggests that every historical moment will be regained and made accessible. Human language will also undergo a redemption; “the fetters of script,” which only emerged after the Fall, will be destroyed (*Selected Writings* 4: 406). Consequently, our feeble attempts at written history will be supplanted by a “festively enacted history” (*S.W.* 4: 406) which is “citable in all its moments” (*S.W.* 4: 390). The notion of a “citable” and “enacted” history alludes to Benjamin’s contemporaneous writings on Brecht, in which he claims that epic theater is defined by the “quotable gesture” (*S.W.* 4: 305). For Benjamin, epic theater is a form of public catharsis, one in which the audience is granted temporary relief from worry (*S.W.* 4: 302). If utopia is to be understood as an eternal epic play, it is a place in which we revel in the complete “absence of horror,”²⁹ together with everyone we ever knew and will ever know.

Despite their admittedly fragmented quality, the utopias of Benjamin and Borges shed light on why they were compelled to refute time in the first place, and why this task took on a newfound urgency during a period of conflict. Each author notes that the concept of linear time is unspeakably cruel in its implications for the dead; if time truly were linear, and the past could never be re-accessed,

²⁸ Borges refers to Plato’s eternity of forms as a “monstrous museum” in “Historia de la eternidad.”

²⁹ This line is taken from another enigmatic notebook fragment of Benjamin’s, which states that “To be happy means to be without horror” (Leslie 235). The relaxation of redeemed humanity, therefore, constitutes a form of ultimate happiness.

there could be no real redemption for those who were lost to time. “The enemy” would never “cease” (*Selected Writings* 4: 391) and life would be marked by its “poverty” (*Otras inquisiciones* 247). Any attempt at mourning would consequently ring hollow. A challenge to linear time would, at least, allow one to imagine a zone of redemption for the human casualties of history. Consequently, the task of writing against linear time is motivated by an affective urgency as much as it is by philosophical reason; as Borges admits, to negate time is an act of “desperation” and “secret consolation” (*Otras inquisiciones* 256). Benjamin echoes this idea in “On the Concept of History,” in which he remarks that the suspension of homogenous time occurs at moments of “danger” in which we are reminded of “the image of enslaved ancestors” (*Selected Writings* 4: 391-394). The act of mourning, these essays remind us, requires the preservation of an unrelentingly theological imagination in the face of crisis.

Borges ends the introduction to “Nueva refutación del tiempo” with the following dedication:

“To him was bestowed, like all men, the bad times in which he lived” (*Otras inquisiciones* 236).³⁰

While these words are directed towards his great-granduncle Juan Crisóstomo Lafinur, a poet who died in political exile, they apply just as aptly to himself and Benjamin. Walter Benjamin would die by suicide nine months after the completion of “On the Concept of History” while on the run from Nazi forces; Jorge Luis Borges would live on to witness the sheltering of Nazi war criminals in his home nation before passing in 1986. Perhaps both writers eventually found respite from the “bad times” which were bestowed plentifully upon them. The question is one that is beyond the scope of this essay, and possibly writing itself.

³⁰ Translated from the original Spanish “le tocaron, como a todos los hombres, malos tiempos en que vivir.”

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