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## Mirror of Time

### Temporality and Contemporaneity in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges

Jennifer Donnelly

#### Abstract

Jorge Luis Borges recognized the cracking facade of modernity and the fragility of its monist absolutisms, its commitment to linearity, and its faith in historical progress. By disavowing the ability of time to be contained within any collective structure of representation, Borges both refutes modernist conceptions of time and offers insight into recent theories of contemporaneity. A contemporaneous reading of Borges opens lucid temporal relationships, challenges assumptions about the affinities between the self and time, allows for the existence of multiple temporal antimonies, and ultimately reveals the contemporaneous relationship between individual sensations of time of the collective structural composition of temporality.

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### Temporality and Contemporaneity in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges

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Between 1939 and 1945, the absolutist ideologies and insurmountable cultural, political, and economic tensions of the industrialized world erupted into global war. During this period, Jorge Luis Borges published *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* (1940), *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941), and *A New Refutation of Time* (1944-1946). Like many of his contemporaries, Borges recognized the cracking facade of modernity and the fragility of its monist absolutisms, its commitment to linearity, and its faith in historical progress. Borges refutes

modernist conceptions of time by disavowing the ability of time to be contained within any collective structure of representation. Furthermore, Borgesian time is illuminating for recent theories of contemporaneity, because it opens lucid temporal relationships, challenges assumptions about the affinities between the self and time, and allows for the existence of multiple temporal antimonies.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I propose a reading of *The Garden of Forking Paths*, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, and *A New Refutation of Time* based on Borges' theories of temporality. Borges' nonlinearity, idealism, and anti-monism reveal not only his negation of modernist absolutisms, but also the contemporaneous relationship between inherent individual sensations of time of the collective structural composition of temporality.

#### *The Garden of Forking Paths*

Dr. Yu Tsen, a Chinese spy for the Germany army, realizes that he will soon be murdered. His enemy is in pursuit, and he alone holds an important military secret for the Chief. Dr. Yu Tsen flees. In his terror, he has a moment of clarity about temporal instantaneousness, and the (seemingly) unconditional singularity and individuality of time. There can be only one moment of actuality (happening now) in reference to all other moments of actuality (not happening now), and there is only one experience of selfhood, in reference to all other selfhoods: "Then I reflected that all things happen, happen to one,

<sup>1</sup> This essay deals with a narrow subject within the philosophy of time: the refutation of linear time and the emergence of contemporaneity and multiple theories of time over the course of the twentieth-century as a reaction against the universal, progress-oriented modernist theories of time of the early twentieth-century. I am concerned with the way in which Borges refutes modernist theories of time in his essays, and therefore I primarily cite authors who focus on Borges' philosophy of time. For information on the literary interpretation and meaning of Borges' oeuvre, see Beatrix Sarlo, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*, ed. by John King (London: Verso, 1993), Daniel Balderston, *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), and Sylvia Malloy, *Signs of Borges*, trans. by Oscar Montero (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994). For theoretical discussions of Borges' philosophy of time see Ana María Barrenechea, *Borges: The Labyrinth Maker*, trans. by Robert Lima (New York: New York University Press, 1965), Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, "Doubles and Counterparts: Patterns of Interchangeability in Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths*," *Critical Inquiry*, 6, No. 4 (Summer 1980): 639-647, Robert L. Chibka, "The Library of Forking Paths," *Special Issue: The New Erudition* (Autumn, 1996): 106-122, W.H. Bossart, *Borges and Philosophy: Self, Time, and Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003), Kate Jenckes, *Reading Borges after Benjamin* (Albany: Suny Press, 2007), and Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callas, editors, *Cy-Borges* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2009).

precisely now. Century follows century, and things happen only in the present. There are countless men in the air, on land and at sea, and all that really happens happens to me."<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Yu Tsen finds in a telephone book the address of the only man who can help him. He departs immediately by train for the village Ashgrove, narrowly escaping his enemy on the train platform. Uncannily, a group of children direct him towards his destination as he steps off the train. Taking every left fork, Dr. Yu Tsen advances toward the house of Dr. Albert, while ruminating on the work of his great-grandfather, Ts'ui Pên, the author of a lengthy, incomprehensible novel, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, and the builder of a labyrinth that has never been found. At the gate of the home of Dr. Albert, Dr. Yu Tsen is unwittingly led through a garden to the missing work of his ancestor, now in the possession of his host. Dr. Albert had discovered that Ts'ui Pên's novel and his labyrinth were one in the same: a work of time that omits any mention time. After sharing the ancestral text, Dr. Yu Tsen murders Dr. Albert with a single shot. He is shortly arrested, and a story runs in the papers about the mysterious murder of Dr. Albert by Yu Tsen. The Chief, however, interprets the message and the English city named Albert is bombed the following day. Moments before his murder, Dr. Albert revealed about the work of Ts'ui Pên:

The Garden of Forking Paths is a picture, incomplete yet not false, of the universe such as Ts'ui Pên conceived it to be. Differing from Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not think of time as absolute and uniform. He believed in an infinite series of times, in a dizzily growing ever-spreading network of diverging, converging, and parallel times. This web of time- the strands of which approach one another, bifurcate, intersect, or ignore each other through the centuries- embraces every possibility. We do not exist in most of them. In some you exist and not I, while in others I do, and you do not, and in yet others both of us exist. In this one, in which chance has favored me, you have come to my gate. In another, you, crossing the garden, have found me dead. In yet another, I say these very same words, but am an error, a phantom.<sup>3</sup>

The Kafkaesque triad of time, referring to Kafka's parable of man struggling between the antagonistic past and future, is ruptured in Borgesian time into innumerable possible and imaginary pasts and futures: converging, diverging, running parallel, repeating and bearing

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths" in *Ficciones*, ed. Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove Press, 1962), 90. Translated from Jorge Luis Borges, "El Jardín de Senderos que se Bifurcan," in *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, S.A., 1956): "Después reflexioné que todas las cosas le suceden a uno precisamente, precisamente ahora. Siglos de siglos y sólo en el presente ocurren los hechos; innumerables hombres en el aire, en la tierra y el mar, y todo lo que realmente pasa mi pasa a mí..."

<sup>3</sup> Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," 100: "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan es una imagen incompleta, pero no falsa, del universo tal como lo concebía Ts'ui Pên. A diferencia de Newton y de Schopenhauer, su antepasado no creía en un tiempo uniforme, absoluto. Creía en infinitas series de tiempos divergentes, convergentes y paralelos. Esa trama de tiempos que se aproximan, se bifurcan, se cortan o que secularmente se ignoran, abarca todas las posibilidades. No existimos en la mayoría des esos tiempos; en algunos existe usted y no yo; en otros, yo, no usted; en otros, los dos. En éste, que un favorable azar me depara, usted ha llegado a mi casa; en otro, usted, al atravesar el jardín, me ha encontrado muerto; en otro, yo digo estas mismas palabras, pero soy un error, un fantasma."

down on the moment of what “happens happens to me.”<sup>4</sup> In *The Garden of Forking Paths*, self-affirmation is bound between the uniqueness of each passing moment and the time-negating endlessness of repetition, which concurrently “disintegrates and defines the self.”<sup>5</sup> The nonlinear relationship between two temporal moments in a successive series is evident by the indisputable presence of repetition, and therefore the possibility of linear time is nullified for Borges. Linear history is a fiction, a futile attempt to carve a sense of reference for what “happens happens to me” out the vast expanse of limitless time. The negation of linear time bursts the floodgates of temporality, allowing for nearly infinite possibilities of divergent, convergent, and parallel times.

### *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*

In *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, Borges narrates the story of a puzzling encyclopedia entry concerning the land of Uqbar. Borges and his colleagues search exhaustively for information on the illusive Uqbar in order to determine its reality or unreality. Their knowledge of Uqbar is dependent on a single obscure article in one copy of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, 1917, which only obliquely remarks that the literature of Uqbar refers not to reality, but only to the imaginary regions of Tlön and Mlejnas. After the death of a family friend, Borges discovers *The First Encyclopedia of Tlön* in the deceased man’s belongings, and is able to unlock the mystery of Tlön.

In the realm of Tlön, “the world is not a concurrence of objects in space, but a heterogeneous series of independent acts. It is serial and temporal, but not spatial.”<sup>6</sup> The Tlönians lack any structural association between the cognitive, temporal world and the material, spatial world: “they do not conceive of the spatial as everlasting in time.”<sup>7</sup> Like *The Garden of Forking Paths*, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* symbolizes the arbitrary order imposed upon human experience.<sup>8</sup> In the anachronistic postscript of *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, dated 1947 (the story was originally published in 1940) Borges reveals both that Tlön was an imaginary world created by a secret group of scholars, but that since 1940, Tlön entered reality, and was sweeping through society at an astonishing rate. In *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis*

<sup>4</sup> Kafka’s parable: “He has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead. He gives battle to both. To be sure, the first supports him in his fight with the second, for he wants to push him forward, and in the same way the second supports him in his fight with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only theoretically so. For it is not only the two antagonists who are there, but he himself as well, and who really knows his intentions? His dream, though, is that some time in an unguarded moment- and this would require a night darker than any night has ever been yet- he will jump out of the fighting line and be promised, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other.” Quoted from Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking, 1961), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, “Doubles and Counterparts: Patterns of Interchangeability in Borges’ *The Garden of Forking Paths*,” *Critical Inquiry*, 6, No. 4 (Summer 1980): 640.

<sup>6</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” in *Ficciones*, ed. Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove Press, 1962), 23. Translated from Jorge Luis Borges, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” in *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, S.A., 1956): “Elle mundo para ellos no es un concurso de objetos en el espacio; es una serie heterogénea de actos independientes. Es sucesivo, temporal, no espacial.”

<sup>7</sup> Borges, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” 24: “No conciben que lo espacial perdure en le tiempo.”

<sup>8</sup> W. H. Bossart, *Borges and Philosophy: Self, Time, and Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003), 106.

*Tertius*, Borges blends “fictional and material manifestations of the real” seamlessly until the meaning of one is lost without the other.<sup>9</sup>

### *A New Refutation of Time*

In *A New Refutation of Time*, Borges consolidates his ideas about the illusionary nature of time in two philosophical treatises. As in *The Garden of Forking Paths*, he denies the existence of linear time based on the assumption that a single instance of repetition destroys the successive sequence of time: “Is not *one single repeated term* enough to disrupt and confound the history of the world, to reveal that there is no such history?”<sup>10</sup> In the end, however, Borges concedes that his refutations are unsatisfactory, and acknowledges that the denial of temporal succession only leads one back into time:

And yet, and yet...To deny temporal succession, to deny the self, to deny the astronomical universe, appear to be acts of desperation and our secret consolations. Our destiny (unlike the hell of Swedenborg and the hell of Tibetan mythology) is not terrifying because it is unreal; it is terrifying because it is irreversible and iron-bound. Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately is real, and I, unfortunately, am Borges.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, on contradictory terms, Borges seems to accept, despite his refutation, the existence of collective structures of time and the position of the self as embedded in such constructions. Borges has simultaneously established that time is not temporally successive, and that temporal succession is not unreal (and therefore time is not *not* temporally successive.) According to Kate Jenckes in *Reading Borges after Benjamin*, Borges does not necessarily negate time, but instead asserts there is more to temporality than the conception of time as a continuum that is accessible to cognition.<sup>12</sup> In other words, Borges attempts to unlock the concurrent existence of multiple temporalities both within and beyond the limits of comprehension. For Borges, the self not only constructs the past and the present as successive temporal moments, but also deconstructs succession in order to rebuild it, in an unending cycle of self-referentiality. As Borges has shown, it is not enough to look backward at what has been and forward at what will be; time is not a line, but a web.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon Calleja, “Of Mirrors, Encyclopedias, and the Virtual” in *Cy-Borges*, ed. Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2009), 92.

<sup>10</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “A New Refutation of Time” in *On Mysticism*, ed. Suzanne Jill Levine (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 75. Translation of “Nueva Refutación de Tiempo” reprinted from Borges, Jorge Luis. *Selected Non-Fictions*, trans. by Suzanne Levine and Eliot Weinberger. New York: Penguin Books, 1999: “¿No basta un solo término repetido para desbaratar y confundir la historia del mundo, para denunciar que no hay tal historia?”

<sup>11</sup> Borges, “A New Refutation of Time,” 77: “And yet, and yet...Negar la sucesión temporal, negar el yo, negar el universo astronómico, son desesperaciones aparentes y consuelos secretos. Nuestro destino (a diferencia del infierno de Swedenborg y del infierno de la mitología tibetana) no es espantoso por irreal; es espantoso porque es irreversible y de hierro. El tiempo es la substancia de que estoy hecho. El tiempo es un río que me arrebató, pero yo soy el río; es un tigre que me destroza, pero yo soy el tigre; es un fuego que me consume, pero yo soy el fuego. El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; desgraciadamente, soy Borges.”

<sup>12</sup> Kate Jenckes, *Reading Borges after Benjamin* (Albany: Suny Press, 2007), 118.

In order to distinguish the moment “happening now” from all other moments “not happening now,” and thus assert that what “happens happens to me,” referentiality is built out of future presents and past presents in order to locate the eternal present inside of time. Borges continually refutes the domination of linear constructions of time for other temporalities that exist beyond representation. Representational limitations, for Borges, do not reconcile individual sensations of time with collective constructions of time. Jenckes elucidates Borges’ distinction between an idealist conception of history “inside our heads,” and a materialist conception of history “outside our heads,” as a discernment of the limits and capabilities of representation: “What lies outside of representations of linearity and identity are often voiceless forces of history that do not have direct access to language, but which are nevertheless capable of shaking and disturbing dominant forms of representation in such a way that opens new possibilities for the future.”<sup>13</sup>

## Temporal Constructions/Deconstructions

Within Borges’ texts, multiple modes of temporality are constructed within the limitations of knowledge, and then deconstructed, refuted, or contradicted, creating cracks of inconsistency, openness, and even limitlessness in the comprehensiveness of time. Borges refutes both the singularity and precedence of linear time; he allows for the coexistence of contradiction, the concurrence of universalizing time with alternative times, and the presence of multiple temporalities in any moment. Within *The Garden of Forking Paths*, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, and *A New Refutation of Time*, I have identified the interplay of five temporalities: internal temporality, material temporality, representative temporality, recurrent temporality, and eternal presentness. Internal temporality is an idealist conception of an identity in time. Material temporality and representative temporality are “extent” temporalities that exist within the materialist limitations of representation. Recurrent temporality and eternal presentness are both temporalities beyond the structural containment of linear representation.

Internal temporality is an individualistic temporal identity; it is the accumulation of “still living pasts” and “yet lived futures” that are “in effect” in the present moment. Internal temporality reconciles Borges’ “what happens happens to me,” with histories constructed within material temporality and representational temporality. Individual selves internalize numerous definitive historical moments in the development of a temporal identity, including personal experiences, spiritual and mythical attachments, and significant historical events. As an individual moves laterally from an “inner” temporal identity to “outer” surrounding ideological spheres in which multiple temporal influences converge and conflate in the socio-spatial present, dominant temporalities emerge which determine the structural dimension of behavioral control. As a result, the temporal structure of the socio-spatial present is tenuously and consistently vacillated by the passing influence of multiple temporal identities within multiple ideological spheres. Therefore, the individuality of “what happens happens to me” generates a multiplicity of divergent temporalities existing concurrently in the same present moment.

Material temporality is the search for time in space, meaning the objective collection and intellectual dissemination of all objects and spatial associations, from pinheads to Pantheons, into a linear history based on historic value and age value as a concrete verification of the

<sup>13</sup> Jenckes, *Reading Borges after Benjamin*, 100.

continuity of human existence despite the (non)-passage of time.<sup>14</sup> The refutation of material temporality is essentially the denial of any linear history constructed by the continuity of space in time, which is a central theme of Borges' work. Borges undermines the continuity of space in time through eternal presentness in *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* and denies linearity through recurrent temporality in *A New Refutation of Time*. Additionally, Borges refutes material temporality by blurring the distinction between material history and fiction in Ts'ui Pên's labyrinth of *The Garden of Forking Paths*. Ts'ui Pên's labyrinth explores the possibility of multiple "diverging, converging, and parallel" strands of time that embrace every possibility, both what happened and what could have happened. Because Borges draws no distinction between the histories of actual events and the histories of potential non-events, the precedence of "having happened" is neutralized. Therefore, the concrete historical legitimization of material temporality is nullified in *The Garden of Forking Paths*.

Representational temporality is the code of representation (language) through which the cognitive realm of past presents and future presents (internal temporality) is abstracted into the spatial realm (the linear-temporal sequence of material temporality). In *A New Refutation of Time*, Borges recognizes that the inherent quality of language follows a linear-temporal sequence: "All language is of a successive nature; it does not lend itself to reasoning on eternal, intemporal matters."<sup>15</sup> In other words, language is embedded in the structural limitations of its representations, including the constructions of time Borges attempts to reject. Borges recognizes his trap, as a writer bound to words chained in time, yet attempting to refute time, yet never able to reach the possibility of accessing clarity outside of language, and therefore time. In *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, Borges ends the story by recounting his futile translation of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial* as the real world dissolves into Tlön. For Borges, the act is one of defiance, because translation is a material representation of thought in space. Ultimately, the translation will become incomprehensible, as the structural continuum between space and time disintegrates into a Tlönian impossibility.

Furthermore, Borges often misquotes or invents encyclopedic texts and reference books in order to undermine the legitimacy of material temporality and representational temporality. The citation of Liddell Hart's report in the preface of *The Garden of Forking Paths*, upon closer observation, is disorienting and opaque. In comparison to the actual book written by Liddell Hart, Borges has slightly altered the book's title, shifted the month of the event, and changed the page number of the citation.<sup>16</sup> According to Robert Chibka in the "Library of Forking Paths," *The Garden of Forking Paths* breaks the binding of any book that seems to contain it, sending us through stacks that begin eerily to resemble the Library of Babel, full of possibly insignificant variants on indeterminately significant texts.<sup>17</sup> Like *The*

<sup>14</sup> Alois Riegl defined historic-value as "everything that has been and no longer is...in accordance with the modern notion that what has been can never be again, and everything that has been constitutes an irreplaceable and irremovable link in a chain of development," and age-value as "catalysts which trigger in the beholder a sense of the life-cycle." Materials with historic value are specifically related to successive development over time, while those with age-value manifest vague associations of the passage of time due to their origins. From Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origin," trans. Kurt W. Forester and Diane Ghirardo, *Oppositions*, No. 25 (Fall 1982): 21-24.

<sup>15</sup> Borges, "A New Refutation of Time," 68: "Todo lenguaje es de índole sucesiva; no es hábil para razonar lo eterno, lo intemporal."

<sup>16</sup> Robert L. Chibka, "The Library of Forking Paths," *Special Issue: The New Erudition* (Autumn, 1996): 109-110.

<sup>17</sup> Chibka, "The Library of Forking Paths," 109-110.

*Garden of Forking Paths*, the characters of *Tlön*, *Uqbar*, *Orbis Tertius* are both actual people in Borges' life and imaginary figures. Whereas the imaginary reference in *The Garden of Forking Paths* exists outside of the story in the "real world" of material temporality, in *Tlön*, *Uqbar*, *Orbis Tertius*, the "real" encyclopedia becomes a fictional character of the story, but the imaginary reference it contains becomes a reality. By legitimizing fiction through material references, Borges blurs the distinction between reality and fantasy, and therefore dissolves the legitimization of temporalities within the materialist limitations of representation.

Recurrent temporalities are instances of sameness, near-sameness, repetition, and reproduction that interrupt the continuity of linear time and material temporality. In *A New Refutation of Time*, Borges states that the negation of linear time involves two denials: "denying the succession of two terms in a series, and denying the synchronism of terms in two series."<sup>18</sup> That is to say, one must not only deny linearity, but also that linearity is unilateral; one must additionally deny the existence of a single time. Borges continues with a description of the uncanny experience of walking down a street from his childhood thirty years hence, which had not changed:

The easy thought I am somewhere in the 1800s ceased to be a few careless words and became profoundly real. I felt dead, I felt I was an abstract perceiver of the world, struck by an undefined fear imbued with science, or the supreme clarity of metaphysics. No, I did not believe I had traversed the presumed waters of Time; rather I suspected that I possessed the reticent and absent meaning of the inconceivable word eternity...Now I shall transcribe it thus: that pure representation of homogeneous facts- calm night, limpid wall, rural scent of honeysuckle, elemental clay- is not merely identical to the scene on that corner so many years ago; it is, without similarities or repetitions, the same. If we can intuit that sameness, time is a delusion: the impartiality and inseparability of one moment of time's apparent yesterday and another of time's apparent today are enough to make it disintegrate.<sup>19</sup>

For Borges, the concept of sameness demonstrates the insubstantial nature of linear temporality. Objects having separate spatial-temporal conditions, for Borges, are distinguished as two distinct things in both space and time.<sup>20</sup> The sameness of the "homogeneous facts," between Borges' experience and his recollection lack any kind of distinction and are therefore the same thing. The basis of their apparent difference, the passage of several decades, is meaningless; homogeneous facts exist in space yet outside of the historical succession of material temporality. Therefore the homogeneous facts reveal linear history as a performance of time, but not time itself. The homogeneous facts do not

<sup>18</sup> Borges, "A New Refutation of Time," 75: "Negar el tiempo es dos negaciones: negar la sucesión de los términos de una serie, negar el sincronismo de los términos de dos series."

<sup>19</sup> Borges, "A New Refutation of Time," 70: "El fácil pensamiento *Estoy en mil ochocientos y tantos* dejó de ser unas cuantas aproximativas palabras y se profundizó a realidad. Me sentí muerto, me sentí percibidor abstracto del mundo; indefinido temor imbuido de ciencia que es la mejor claridad de la metafísica. No creí, no, haber remontado las presuntivas aguas del Tiempo; más bien me sospeché poseedor del sentido reticente o ausente de la inconcebible palabra eternidad...La escribo, ahora, así: Esa pura representación de hechos homogéneos- noche en serenidad, parecita límpida, olor provinciano de la madre selva, barro fundamental- no es meramente idéntica a la que hubo es esa esquina hace tantos años; es, sin parecidos ni repeticiones, la misma. El tiempo, si podemos intuir esa identidad, es una delusión: la indiferencia e inseparabilidad de un momento de su aparente ayer y otro de su aparente hoy, basta para desintegrarlo."

<sup>20</sup> Bossart, *Borges and Philosophy*, 96.

participate in the theater of history, they can not be recognized as belonging to time that has passed, time that is, or time that will be: they belong to all three. For Borges, when two distinct things are also the same thing, the sameness disintegrates the possibility of movement from one spatial-temporal condition to another, and therefore refutes the passage of time. And if two distinct things are also the same thing there is no longer a single time within which occurrences can be identified in reference to each other, because time multiplies exponentially into divergent and convergent temporalities.

Eternal presentness is the disassociation of time from space. Borges explores eternal presentness in *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* as a refutation of material temporality. In *Tlön*, any affiliation between space and time is nonexistent; events occur in time, but not in space. By breaching space from time, the objects in question lack any reference to materiality: they exist as purely ideological concepts. Borges extrapolates further with a story of lost objects in *Tlönians* time:

Two people are looking for a pencil; the first one finds it and says nothing; the second finds a pencil, no less real, but more in keeping with his expectation. These secondary objects are called *hrönir* and, even though awkward in form, are a little larger than the originals...The methodological development of *hrönir*...has been of enormous service to archaeologists. It has allowed them to question and modify the past, which nowadays is no less malleable or obedient than the future.<sup>21</sup>

In *Tlönian* logic, what would be considered to be two found pencils is actually one lost pencil and two secondary objects, or *hrönir*. There is no spatial continuity between the lost pencil and the found pencil, only the temporal continuity of the idea of a pencil. *Hrönir* represent the disjointed nature of pure idealism. The concepts in this story return to the notion of containment, or the difference between what can be represented within structures accessible to cognition and what exists beyond. Borges refutes the ability to spatially locate time, and therefore also the self's understanding of referentiality in time, within the structures of representation that he has shown to be inexorably linked to materiality.

## Borgesian Temporality and Contemporaneity

Borges' nonlinear temporalities are a reaction against the unilateral linearity of historically progressive modernist time. Borges investigates the concept of multiple temporalities co-existent in the same time and refutes the exclusivity of linear time. By doing so, Borges creates a "space of incompleteness" in the totality of modernist temporality.<sup>22</sup> However, since the early twentieth century, that totality has faded and weakened. From the aftermath of modernity's broken attempt at unity, contemporaneity has emerged as a methodology of temporal thought. According to Terry Smith, "Contemporaneity consists precisely in the acceleration, ubiquity, and constancy of radical disjunctions of perception, of mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world, in the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities, in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social

<sup>21</sup> Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," 29-30: "Dos personas buscan un lápiz; la primera lo encuentra y no dice nada; la segunda encuentra un segundo lápiz no menos real, pero más ajustado a su expectativa. Esos objetos secundarios se llaman *hrönir* y son, aunque de forma desairada, un poco más largos...La metódica elaboración de *hrönir*...ha prestado servicios prodigiosos a los arqueólogos. Ha permitido interrogar y hasta modificar el pasado, que ahora no es menos plástico y menos dócil que el provenir."

<sup>22</sup> Jenckes, *Reading Borges After Benjamin*, 138.

multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them.”<sup>23</sup>

Have Borges’ nonlinear refutations been eclipsed by the emergence of contemporaneity, or is Borges’ work transcendent as a critique of temporal perceptions? This question is layered with many queries about the nature of time and temporal cognizance. Is there any distinction between one moment and another beyond limited constructions of history? Can the content of temporality change in different times, or is it structure of temporality that changes? Or is it the frequency of temporality that changes and it is the content that is repeated? If one group of people constructs temporality through any of the methodologies elaborated by Borges, what is to say that all peoples of the past and future have not also done so, and will not also do so, at least in some combination? In other words, what is universal about the sensation of time, and what is limited by historically specific collective temporal constructions?

On one hand, many of Borges’ perceptions of multiple convergent and divergent temporalities are deceptively similar to the theory of contemporaneity. The concept of multiple concurrent temporalities in effect on a global scale can be understood on Borgesian terms as multiple temporalities in effect in the self, and then constructed into socio-collective drifts of time. Borges is extrapolating the structural relationship between sensations of time “inside one’s head,” and the collective construction of temporality “outside of one’s head.” By doing so, Borges expands nature of temporal understanding beyond the unilateral structural constraints of modernism, and can be understood as a methodology for theorizing about the asynchronous multiplicity of contemporaneity. Furthermore, the temporal flow between modernity and contemporaneity is a continuum, rather than a rupture. Therefore, the absolutist historical progression of modernist temporality is contemporarily relevant, if only as one of many aspects of Harry Hartoonunian’s concept of the thickened present, “a present filled with traces of different moments and temporalities” from the past.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, contemporaneity is conceptually a universal multiplicity, whereas Borges’ temporality is a refutation of a totality and a symptom of modernity. According to Smith, contemporaneity is not an entry point or evidence of a greater totality, but is instead a conceptualization of temporality in which the particular has become the general.<sup>25</sup> However, Borges often negates totality by inverting time, creating an internal self-negating cycle, which is both a totality and the opposite of totality, and therefore not yet released from totality. As Borges’s deconstructions negate modernist time, constructions of the past and future generate an eternally referential “happens now” and in effect carve modernist time out of negated time. This time, which is then negated again by Borges’s time, in turn negates eternity onto itself by the process of its present non-presentness. Borges’ negated time is therefore encapsulated in a paradox that cannot be separated from modernist time. Though Borgesian temporalities are an aspect of contemporaneity, contemporaneity also involves multiplicities of temporality beyond the Borgesian web.

The critical distinction lies between Borges’ negation of modernist time and Borges’ understanding of the relationship between the internal sensation of time and external

<sup>23</sup> Terry Smith, “Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okuwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 8-9.

<sup>24</sup> Harry Hartoonunian, “Remembering the Historical Present,” *Critical Inquiry*, 33, No. 3 (Spring, 2007): 476.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, “Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question,” 9.

collective constructions of time: the former is deeply embedded in modernism, yet the latter deals with the universal human experience of time. Borgesian temporality is both a mirror of modernist time and a transcendent exploration of contemporaneous temporalities. Within the cracks of modernity, Borgesian time manifests an “either/or” relationship between the self and temporality. Contemporaneously, however, Borgesian time coalesces into a “both/and” relationship between the self, structural temporality, and a web of enmeshed and divergent interpretations of time.



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