

Kate Jenckes

Reading Borges After Benjamin: Allegory, Afterlife, and the Writing of History

New York: State University of New York Press, 2007

In Kate Jenckes's clearly written and often persuasive book, Borges scholars finally encounter a sustained study of the remarkable parallels and intersections in Borges and Walter Benjamin's thought. Over the course of four chapters, Jenckes suggests that Benjamin offers an alternative insight into what she sees as the two dominant modes in Borges criticism: those who interpret his metaphysical leanings as an escape from history, and those who have sought to issue a corrective to this, in most cases earlier, group by grounding his writing in a longing for origins, a search for the stable ground of history. Of the latter set, Jenckes confronts readings by Ricardo Piglia and Beatriz Sarlo, charging that both have misinterpreted Borges's writings by failing to take his metaphysics seriously enough.

Distinguishing itself from both groups, this study emphasizes how Borges's writing emerges as a sustained interrogation of historical categories, one that recognizes the lessons of metaphysics in order to critique naïve historical narratives that fail to allow for the ceaseless possibility of the past's intervention in and reconfiguration of the present. A text or event's "afterlife," as Jenckes understands the term, would be just such an intervention. Thus, in her reading of the early poem, "Rosas," the reader observes how a voice from the past, a single name, can invade and alter the affective and discursive atmosphere of a room temporally and spatially isolated from the historical moment it indexes.

The book's opening chapter, "Origins and *Orillas*" presents Walter Benjamin's melancholic philosophy of temporal experience in his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" as an appropriate theoretical formulation to harmonize with Borges's interest in the fragmentary histories he refuses or fails to inscribe in any linear configuration. Reading against what she understands as Piglia and Sarlo's shared tendency to interpret Borges's poetic project as a search for origins, Jenckes finds in the poet's early verses (primarily drawn from *Fervor en Buenos Aires*) an insistent recognition of the uncontainability, instability, and fluidity of the past. Alongside Benjamin's "melancholic allegorist," Jenckes observes Borges walking the streets of Buenos Aires, collecting discarded objects and memories not in order to reconstitute any specific or coherent sense of self, but, as she writes, "to interrogate the poet's present sense of identity" (20). If these disjunctive moments are not always voluntary ("Casi juicio final"), the poet does not conceal or exclude them, but allows the voices to irritate any sense of closure.

Chapter Two, "Bios-Graphus," elaborates the close-knit character of being and time in a reading of Borges's "biography," *Evaristo Carriego*. Jenckes draws on Paul de Man's concept of biographical "defacement," presented here as the denaturalizing and displacement of the biographical subject, in order to bring Borges's essay, "El otro Whitman" into dialogue with *Evaristo Carriego*. In this context, both texts are portrayed as figuring the impossibility of representing the totality of a given subject. Carriego's scarred face, Jenckes writes, declares itself as language, and therefore interrupts any possibility of a "natural," coherent identity. This notion of interruption leads her to the chapter's closing reading of Borges's "Historia del tango." There she claims that such a physical writing capable of "disfiguring" figuration enacts an alternative violence to the concealing, totalizing violence of law.

If the preceding chapters moved from the melancholic reflections of a subject's place in time to the more radical narrative program of reading the self through the temporal and subjective displacement of writing another's biography, the third chapter, "Allegory, Ideology, Infamy," finds Jenckes puzzling out a recurring complication in Borges criticism: the work's relationship to the state.

Returning to Benjamin's peculiar understanding of the allegorical mode in history writing, Jenckes goes on to recognize allegory as a form of ideology critique. "Rather than destabilizing representations of identity only to suture them back into ideal 'futures of social totality,'" she writes, "allegory would trace paths of a history not reducible to such ideals, opening the ideological concept of history to its unrecognized exclusions" (77). At stake in the term is the struggle to retain an open reading of history with an eye attentive to exclusions. With this notion of allegory in mind, Jenckes opposes Frederic Jameson's "national allegory" as the ideological acknowledgement and simultaneous disavowal of difference (71), and Doris Sommer's critique of Benjamin's history of "infinite regression" as a misunderstanding that fails to recognize "the possibility of a nonlinear conception of history" (72). The rhetorical question arises; if allegorical history cannot be found in the Marxian collective spirit or the nineteenth century Latin American romances Sommer has dubbed "foundational fictions," then perhaps Borges possesses the correct Benjaminian technique.

Rather than framing the question this way, Jenckes argues for a post-colonial reading of Borges's *Historia universal de la infamia*. Borrowing from Dipesh Chakrabarty's description of subaltern history, Jenckes conceives of Borges's narratives about Billy the Kid ("El asesino disinteresado Bill Harrigan") and a fictional swindler in the southern United States ("El espantoso redentor Lazarus Morrell") as attempts to implicate the ideological stitches in any universal history, the silent moments of "infamia," or "that which cannot be told" (78). Allegorical in the traditional sense of synecdochally representing a national historical moment, these stories become Benjaminian allegory as they parody and draw attention to the impossibility and exclusionary force of any such cohesive project. They pretend at telling universal history, while all the while invoking, writes Jenckes, "the 'nothing' that 'aturde' beneath the stories...and its perpetual potential to disturb all claims to a universal history or the equivalential chains of more local—that is, regionalist or nationalist—ones" (92).

"Reading History's Secrets in Benjamin and Borges," the last chapter in Jenckes's book, is devoted to Borges's more explicitly philosophical or theoretical essays on history and temporality collected in *Otras Inquisiciones* and *Historia de la eternidad*. In the chorus of Nietzsche, Pascal, Schopenhauer, et al, that echo throughout this chapter, Jenckes seeks out Borges's "precursors" and reinforces her claim for a history writing always attentive to difference, "a form of writing that is also a kind of listening" (135). In comparing Borges's essays to Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Jenckes concludes that both thinkers perform empowering incisions into the logic of containment, replacing what she deems "idealist" and solipsistic modes of writing with a radical materialism that "salvages" (the Angelus Novus's desire in the "Theses") material traces for use beyond their apparent physical interment.

The timeliness of Jenckes's book should help generate further debate about not only Benjamin's role in Borges criticism, but the configuration of Borges scholarship in general. Some readers, however, might find themselves frustrated with the book's somewhat uncritical enthusiasm regarding what it presents as Borges and Benjamin's shared notion of writing history. Despite

the author's repeated use of the term, readers wary of vanguard vitalism might ask what Borges and Jenckes mean by an ambiguous phrase, like "an 'act of life'" (xv). While the author's introduction recognizes the writers' political disparity before claiming the book "does not intend to give a comprehensive account of the differences or similarities between the two" (xiii-xiv), readers might wonder how a more thorough historicist reading could help elaborate distinctions between their respective theoretical paradigms. (Or how might connections such as Borges and Benjamin's shared interest in Kabbalistic studies inflect their theories on temporality?)

Lastly, although Jenckes does a generally excellent job of translating Benjamin's texts into a more straightforward prose supportive of her overall argument, readers should not seek out this book as a commentary on the German philosopher's writings. On several pages suggestive parallels are left to resonate without explanation, and elsewhere Benjamin's texts are approached through a previous scholar's gloss rather than the author's own interpretive work. Yet, these minor distractions should not prevent readers from appreciating how skillfully Jenckes intertwines Benjamin's thinking with Borges's texts; so skillfully, in fact, that one might finish this book wondering how it was ever possible to read Borges before Benjamin.

Thomas McEnaney
University of California, Berkeley