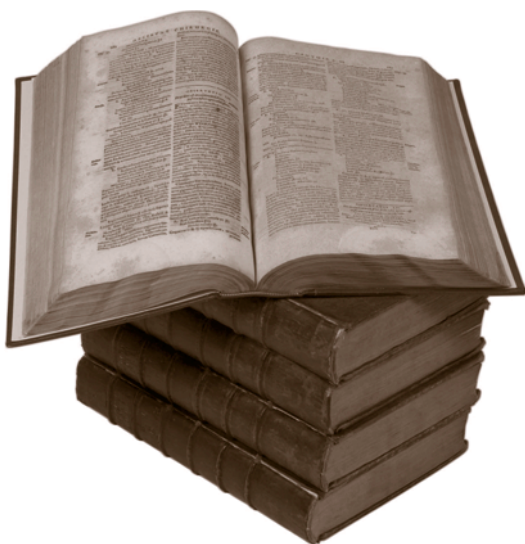


# READING BORGES

✧ after ✧

# BENJAMIN

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Allegory,

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Afterlife,

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and the

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Writing of History

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Kate Jenckes

# Reading Borges after Benjamin

SUNY series in Latin American and Iberian Thought and Culture

Jorge J. E. Gracia and Rosemary Geisdorfer Feal, editors

# Reading Borges after Benjamin

*Allegory, Afterlife, and the  
Writing of History*

Kate Jenckes

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*For Wolf Soblich, who taught me that reading matters*

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# Introduction

El tiempo es aquí lo único que sobra, y sobra no al modo contabilizable de los relojes, sino al modo en que sobran, enteras, la vida y la historia.

—Elizabeth Collingwood-Selby, “Un retrazo en la escritura”

The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life.

—Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator”

In “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin suggests that life should be thought in relation to literature and language rather than nature. For him, life thought in terms of nature is conceived as discrete units or “lives,” an organic sense of wholeness, and a linear development from birth to death and from parent to child. Literature, on the other hand, cannot be thought in such discrete and linear ways. A book does not live and die autonomously and pass its essence, intact, along to an offspring. Made up of language, it shares words and ideas with other books, with predecessors and contemporaries as well as those that follow it. Transmission of any sort—including translation, intertextuality, and tradition—is never direct and unilateral. Linguistic difference and, as Jorge Luis Borges’s story “Pierre Menard” purports to demonstrate, a difference intrinsic to time and writing interrupts any one-way descent from the original. Indeed, the recognition of such manifold difference infects the very notion of the original, which loses its privileged status as an autonomous work outside of time, and is shown to be part of what Benjamin calls linguistic life and the ongoing life (or afterlife) of artworks.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to remember that Benjamin's somewhat surprising analogy concerns history as well as literary history. His description of history as a kind of life, thought through the "life" of literature and translation, emphasizes both singularity and an interrelatedness that exceeds and interrupts every conception of either autonomy or direct relation. He insists that history is not a setting, a static and immortal universality in which individual lives occur. It is not linear or progressive: the past does not authorize the present nor does the present determine the past. Like the translated work or the precursor, the past exists in time just like its translation or successor. It is both vital and mortal; it is subject to change based on who is regarding it; it can be rewritten in the present but it can also shatter attempts to represent it.

As works such as "Pierre Menard" and "Kafka y sus precursores" indicate, Borges had similar ideas about literary history. His notion of precursors and originals that are invented or rewritten by their successors as well as vice versa is strikingly similar to Benjamin's description of artistic life and afterlife. Like Benjamin, Borges considered life as well as literature to be irremediably temporal, and he viewed time as neither a linear development nor a passive setting, but as an uncertain materiality that both takes us away from ourselves and constitutes our sense of who we are ("Time is a river that takes me away, but I am that river," *Otras inquisiciones* 187).

What is often not acknowledged is that Borges was concerned with history as well as literary history and individual experiences of temporality.<sup>2</sup> His repeated insistence that life and representation exist in time responds to the same questions of singularity and difference and the idea that life always exceeds its representations that Benjamin describes in "The Task of the Translator" as the nature of both life and history. The places in Borges's writing that refute temporal linearity and a stable sense of identity demand that we learn to look for what has been left out of their constructions, both at a level of individual life history and larger narratives, such as national, imperial, or universal history. Paul de Man's distinction that "temporality" denotes a passive unfolding, whereas "history" introduces the possibility of interrupting such unfolding, allows us to understand what is most historical about Borges's writings on time, life, and history (*Aesthetic Ideology* 133). For Borges, as for Benjamin, the past is never dead, but can irrupt in the present and change the way we see the world. Lives and times that are left out of dominant narratives have the ability to interrupt those narratives, forcing us to acknowledge the structures of exclusion on which they are based.

Borges does not always embrace the temporal nature of life and representation. He often portrays himself wishing for a point outside of time on which to ground a sense of himself and the world around him, only

to reveal the impossibility of the same. He suggests that he would like, like his rival Carlos Argentino Daneri in “El aleph,” to appropriate time’s shifting movement and contain it within a totalizing representation (Daneri’s lifework is titled “The Earth,” and aims to represent the entire planet), but then he admits that the most he can do is piece together a fragmented account that can only gesture to an ongoing sense of time, which includes his own mortality. In his first published collection, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (collected in *Obra poética*), Borges opens his book at the family cemetery, as if looking for a ground of identity that would legitimate his career as an Argentine writer, but then notices that that ground is a ground of dust and time. He spends the rest of the book sifting through fragments that indicate the limited and contingent nature of any representation of identity and linear time.

This form of pointing to a historicity that can never be fully represented constitutes a kind of *allegory*, in Benjamin’s peculiar sense of the term. In Benjamin’s understanding, allegory breaks up naturalized concepts of history and life, creating discontinuities through which other times and histories can emerge. Tom Cohen helpfully glosses the term as “allography” or “other-writing,” describing it as a practice of writing that, like translation, indicates a difference in language that corresponds to history’s ongoing and infinitely singular alterity (*Ideology* 12). Although Borges rejects allegory as an “aesthetic error,” he also acknowledges that it merely exacerbates an abstract aspect of language that is impossible to avoid, even in such forms as the symbol or the novel, which purport to represent immediacy and particularity (“De las alegorías a las novelas,” *Otras inquisiciones* 153–56). If the symbol, the novel, and allegory constitute “maps of the universe,” the symbol and the novel are like Borges’s famous imperial map that is spread over the colonized territory, and allegory is perhaps the same map, but ill-fitting and shredding with time, perforated by an otherness that it cannot keep covered. Allegory thus concerns a sense of life that cannot be fully represented, but rather gestures beyond itself to what both Benjamin and Borges describe as the “secrets of history”—that is, a conception of history that can never be appropriated by those who Benjamin calls history’s victors.

I do not intend to imply that Borges and Benjamin had identical projects. Their different relationships to the states of emergency that rocked the twentieth century, as well as their political convictions, differentiate them considerably from one another. Benjamin lost his life under persecution from the Nazis, while Borges lost his job at the municipal library under Juan Domingo Perón; Benjamin was an avowed Marxist who believed in the possibility of a social revolution, while Borges was a lifelong skeptic who never expressed faith that the world could change except in the most minute of ways.<sup>3</sup> This book does not intend to give a

comprehensive account of the differences or similarities between the two: it is not a strictly comparative book in any traditional sense of the term. Its objective is to explore points of resonance between the two authors around a sense of *life* that is both mortal and ongoing, singular and differential; and a practice of *allegory* or allography that indicates this life as an excess or alterity, and in doing so, interrupts representations that seek to fix it into naturalized narratives of linearity and identity.

The project of reading Borges “after” Benjamin does not mean to suggest, of course, a linear progression or a direct influence. The analyses focus on Borges, with Benjamin’s ideas on allegory and historical or life representation intervening allegorically. Although Borges and Benjamin have received ample commentary over the years, this interaction between the two draws attention to aspects of both of their work that have either become stale or have been overlooked entirely. Reading Borges in relationship to Benjamin has the distinct advantage of drawing out ethical and political implications about his considerations of temporality and life that have largely escaped the purview of his critics. Borges was long accused of being a writer of unreality who thought with his back to history. In the last twenty or so years, the emphasis has been on bringing him “back” to history, that is, to place him into a historical and cultural “landscape.”<sup>4</sup> Such a tendency has gone hand in hand with international trends of new historicism and the historicist side of cultural studies, critical practices that also latched onto Benjamin, reorienting him away from epistemological questions to focus on things like urban space and popular culture. The readings presented in these pages stress the intimate relationship between language and life, and, in so doing, work to undo the false opposition between literature and history that remains a predominant feature in cultural criticism today.

Perhaps one of the most pronounced differences between Benjamin and Borges is a difference in tone. Borges often acknowledges a wish to escape temporal uncertainty and find refuge in atemporal forms of representation. He repeatedly portrays himself seeking a ground of identity—an enduring sense of self, city, or nation, a solid sense of the past or the present—only to recognize that he is “unfortunately” a temporal being. Alberto Moreiras describes Borges as replacing Lyotardian metanarratives with “mournful intonation” (“entonación desdichada,” *Tercer espacio* 129). Such repetition and resignation contrasts considerably with Benjamin, whose writings are not without a certain melancholy, but they are at the same time charged with an anguished sense of hope. This difference, however, is instructive. In spite of his apparent reluctance to accept life’s temporal nature, Borges returns to it compulsively, never allowing himself to fall completely for the timeless metaphors that he

turns over and over in his hands. Although often expressed with a resigned tone, Borges finds a sense of *life* in such temporal difference: a life that spills over discrete representations of life and death, an ongoing sense of life that rumbles beneath narratives of modernization, nationalization, and universal history. Borges's reluctant acknowledgment of such temporality and his repeated attempts to escape it reminds us that it is not necessary to have a voluntary relationship with time in order to experience its effects on representation. Benjamin would have undoubtedly agreed, hoping that the flashes of history would strike even where least welcome, and that the differences between a messianic materialist and the "feeble artifice of an Argentine astray in metaphysics" (*Otras inquisiciones* 170) might not be so profound.<sup>5</sup>

In the spirit of both authors' fondness for margins and forgotten texts, I have for the most part avoided the more celebrated parts of Borges's oeuvre to focus on texts that represent, often in a "skeletal" way, the questions of life, history, and identity that I have been discussing here. I begin with Borges's first three books of poetry, in which he explores his relationship to the physical and cultural space of Buenos Aires, and his biography of Evaristo Carriego, a poet who wrote about Buenos Aires at the turn of the century. I find these texts especially intriguing because they appear to be invested in establishing a sense of regional identity based on a linear relationship to the past, whether through blood relations and an inherited sense of propriety in the city, or through elective affinities and literary history. This has been the conclusion of the handful of critics who have considered them, in any case—among them some of Borges's most influential readers, including Ricardo Piglia, Beatriz Sarlo, and Sylvia Molloy. Yet Borges's remarks, made on several occasions, that his early poems prefigured all that was to come later, require that we read his early writings about life and the city with an eye to what does not fit in such representations of identity and lineage.

Borges's first books of poems open with the mortal ground of the Recoleta cemetery, and then show him wandering through a city streaked with time and mortality. He tries to find refuge in images of the past, but he is reminded again and again that both he and the city inhabit a temporal world, and are subject to ongoing change and a past that refuses to remain in the past. Language is an unwilling protagonist in this process, providing both the allure of a stable representation of self and city, and inflicting its repeated failure. Borges observes this failure reluctantly in both his own poetry and the cemeteries' sepulchral rhetoric, but ends up calling it an "act of life."

He explores the relationship between life and representation further in *Evaristo Carriego*, which is ostensibly a biography about the eponymous



poet, but also includes meditations about life, death, and representation in Buenos Aires. In this book, Borges critically examines the concept of biography, that is, the idea that there could be a definitive writing of life, and he rejects the idea that a regional identity could be represented by such a biographical figure, even if the figure is a famous poet such as Carriego, Whitman, or even (implicitly) Borges himself. Borges's faux biography demonstrates how a single life cannot be properly told and how a regional poet cannot represent a regional identity, but it also addresses the impossibility of representing life in the modern form of the state, which links together individual lives in a general life of the nation. Borges introduces a writing practice—performed by knife fighters and guitar players, among others—that interrupts such privative representations of life and indicates the interpenetration of life and death, self and other that is the basis of life itself, both individual and communal.

In the second half of the book, I shift my focus from questions of life and death in Buenos Aires to a consideration of what is excluded from regional and universal representations of time and history. Borges says of the British conquest of India: "They did not accumulate only space, but also time: that is to say, experiences, experiences of nights, days, terrains, mountains, cities, cleverness, heroisms, betrayals, pains, destinies, deaths, diseases, beasts, happiness, rites, cosmogonies, dialects, gods, veneration" (*Discusión* 43). In *Historia universal de la infamia* (*Universal History of Infamy*), he shows how such subhistories have the potential to "aturdir," disturb or rattle, the dominant narratives. Borges's allegories of these narratives—not strictly "national allegories," which compared to Benjamin's understanding of allegory constitute another form of national narrative, dedicated to representing an albeit unstable totality—point to these active silences and the ways in which they mark the stories that exclude them. Such exclusions can be given a representation and even a sense of identity, as the enumerative list of African American history at the beginning of "El espantoso redentor Lazarus Morell" ("The Horrible Redeemer Lazarus Morell") suggests. Nevertheless, that does not erase the forced silence of the slaves, which to this day can irrupt into North American national narratives.

One of the most important ideas presented in these pages is that it is not enough to bring such excluded elements into representation. Spanish dictionaries can introduce the verb "to lynch" to their vocabularies, as we read in "El espantoso redentor Lazarus Morell," but the horror of lynching can never be adequately represented. Nor should we ignore it simply because it cannot be entirely represented. Rather, Borges seems to suggest that we should try to represent such things, acknowledging at the same time that it is impossible to represent them entirely.

Allegorical or allographical writing must be an ongoing endeavor, pointing to an “other” sphere that is always outside representation, and yet whose silences and exclusions can be traced in the cracks and crevices of language. Translating these silences into dictionary entries, or giving them their own spot in history, may be useful in certain respects, but it also neutralizes the singular force of their alterity, which has the potential to irrupt into what we think we know about the world.

The first three chapters focus on the works I have just mentioned, together with some of Benjamin’s most important discussions of history, allegory, and representation. There are also incursions into what I like to think of as the “afterlife” of Benjamin’s ideas in the work of Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida. The final chapter puts Borges’s work into more direct contact with these thinkers, focusing on the way in which history and life can perhaps best be understood through language, as Benjamin says in “The Task of the Translator.” The chapter explores the relationships between power and representation, writing and history, the past and the future, and repetition and difference in a series of essays by Benjamin and Borges, in conjunction with the notions of mourning and materiality as thought by de Man and Derrida. It considers the idea that history appears as a material excess in language, which can either be denied by representation, or elicited as an index of history’s “secrets.” Benjamin and Borges agree, albeit with different intonations, that representation that seeks to bring the past fully into the present closes itself off to life and history, while representation that acknowledges its limits and excesses opens itself to a living history that includes the most extreme secret of all: the future.

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