

CHAPTER 1

Origins and *Orillas* History, City, and Death in the Early Poems

Aunque la voz . . .
oficia en un jardín petrificado
recuerdo con todas mis vidas
por qué olvido.

—Alejandra Pizarnik

Critics have long argued that Borges was obsessed with the past. His texts have been understood as attempts to escape history, or, especially in the first decade of his career, to impose a mythic ahistoricism on the present. However, a careful examination of Borges's early books of poems—*Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), *Luna de enfrente* (1925), and *Cuaderno San Martín* (1929)—suggests that Borges was not interested in rejecting history, but in developing a sense of history that would not be based on linear and progressivist claims. Representations of a nonlinear time, a familiar conceit in his later fictions, appear in these first volumes in the form of a history that does not remain neatly in the past, but which intervenes in the figure of a progressive present represented by the modernization of Buenos Aires. Such an intervention introduces a temporality that is excluded from a historicism that attempts to leave the past securely contained in what Borges calls a sepulchral form of representation. Borges's early books of poems do not exclude history or, as some critics suggest, reject the present for a glorified past, but rather work to open history to something beyond the accumulative present of a progressive modernity. This attention to history by way of an irrecoverable past is what I call, following Benjamin, a melancholic or allegorical relationship with loss, and which, as I will attempt to show in this and subsequent

chapters, opens the possibility for a relationship between history, identity, and writing that is radically distinct from a linear and successive (whether progressive or regressive) understanding of history.

Family Trees

In an influential essay from 1980, Ricardo Piglia proposes that Borges's writings are based on a "ficción de origen" ("fiction of origin"), a fact that is most noticeable in his early writings, but which is evident throughout his work (87). Beatriz Sarlo, taking up this idea several years later, observes an "obsession with origins" in Borges's earliest published works, in which he appropriates the past as a means of legitimizing the present and his personal position within that present (*Modernidad* 45). Piglia's argument, later modified to the anachronistic observation that Borges (who was born in 1899) was the last great writer of the nineteenth century, is that Borges establishes his legitimacy as a writer by appealing to the dominant nineteenth-century narratives of national construction. Piglia charges that Borges bases his writings on a myth of origins through which "he narrates his access to the properties that make writing possible [for him]" (87). Unlike his contemporary Roberto Arlt, he does this not as a means of learning how to achieve legitimacy in the Argentine cultural market, but as a "narración genealógica," a narration of his family history that demonstrates his legitimacy as an Argentine writer. Piglia cites as an example Borges's consideration of the fact that many of the street names in Buenos Aires also appear in his family history: "This vain skein of streets that repeat the past names of my blood: Laprida, Cabrera, Soler, Suárez. Names that echo the (already secret) targets, the republics, the horses and the mornings, the dates, the victories, the military deaths" (88).

Piglia argues that Borges bases his entire body of writing on the naming and renaming of figures from this lineage. The result is a family narrative that implies a specific form of both history and language: "The succession of ancestors and offspring constitutes an onomastic index that repeats the structure of a family tree" (87). History is represented in Borges's writing, Piglia suggests, as a linear and successive ordering of names that leads back into a firm foundation, a family tree with its roots securely planted in the ground of the past. The linear structure of history in this description is accompanied by a particular emphasis on the name. The naming of ancestors in Borges's texts, such as the above citation in which he cites the names of the city streets as names that also appear in his own family history, is said to form an "onomastic index," an arrangement of names in which the names are presumed to indicate (*indice*) the past directly, like the branches and trunk of the family tree that lead directly to the ground. However, even in

the passage that Piglia cites, the names do not function in this way: the onomastic index of the city is likened to a tangled skein that repeats the author's family names, names that "retumban," echo or resound, with events, dates, horses, and republics. In this example, at least, the solid ground of the past and of the name is not quite as solid as Piglia suggests.

Sarlo builds on Piglia's explanation of Borges's writing as a "fiction of origins." She reads Borges's early texts as the culmination of a *criollista* ideal that aimed to protect what was seen as a properly Argentine space of culture from the new immigrants who had been crowding Buenos Aires since the turn of the century.¹ What she describes as his "obsessive relationship with origins" was a means of establishing a mythic foundation of this culture, which would have excluded those more recently arrived (this was indeed the case with Borges's contemporary Leopoldo Lugones). Sarlo suggests that Borges, having returned in 1921 after several years in Europe, began his published career in Buenos Aires with the double figure of a return, one that was out of reach for the thousands of immigrants who had recently made Buenos Aires their home. She proposes that unlike these immigrants, Borges returned to Buenos Aires with a double sense of origin firmly in place, one that included both his European roots and his Argentine past. He was "a *criollo* man, a man with origin; a citizen of the world, and at the same time of a country that was strictly limited to Buenos Aires" (*Modernidad* 44–45). Enrique Pezzoni describes Borges's enthusiasm for his *criollo* identity in these early years as a kind of fervor: a nearly religious zeal for cultural salvation which, however, was soon transformed into an ongoing coming to terms with the fallen nature of being (*Texto* 72).²

Although Sarlo later focuses on the figure of a double inscription or double origin in relation to the cultural-historical site that Borges calls the "*orillas*," referring literally to the edges or limits of the city, she begins with the more central figure of the Recoleta cemetery that appears as the subject of the first poem of *Fervor de Buenos Aires*.³ She sees this poem as representing a "beginning" in Edward Saïd's sense of the word, in which the differences that establish cultural identity are set forth in the opening of a given work (*Modernidad* 45, 46n). She interprets the fact that Borges begins his first book of poetry with the central cemetery of Buenos Aires as the indication of a poetic and civic ground, a privileged site of belonging where his ancestors lie and where he too will be buried, past and future contained in a single site of "origin": "Lo anterior: escuchado, leído, meditado, / lo sentí en la Recoleta, / junto al propio lugar en que han de enterrarme" ("The anterior: heard, read, meditated, / I felt it in the Recoleta, / next to the very place in which they will have to bury me," cited in Sarlo, *Modernidad* 45).

For Sarlo, Borges's early writings are based on the figure of a return, through which he represents his sense of belonging to a *criollista* cultural space that has its roots in the past. I want to argue, however, that Borges was aware from the outset that no such return is possible, both in the sense that it is impossible to return in time, but also in terms of representation: that is, the fact that there can be no return or recuperation possible in language, which would be the condition of possibility of a *criollista* cultural project.

A Journey of No Return

If after his years abroad, Borges wished that he could return to an older Buenos Aires, he recognized almost immediately that he could not. He acknowledges in his earliest writings that it is not only impossible to return to a point of departure across the Atlantic and over a period of several years, but that a real return or connection to the past is not possible even in everyday existence, from one minute to the next. He describes his return from Europe in "La nadería de la personalidad" ("The Nothingness of Personality"), an essay published in *Inquisiciones* (1925).⁴ This emblematic departure is told as a scene of farewell to a friend in Mallorca, with the tacit acknowledgment that the two would probably never see each other again. Of the moment of this farewell and the departure from Europe, Borges says,

ocurrióseme que nunca justificaría mi vida un instante pleno, absoluto, contenedor de los demás, que todos ellos serían etapas provisorias, aniquiladoras del pasado y encaradas hacia el porvenir, y que fuera de lo episódico, de lo presente, de lo circunstancial, no éramos nadie. Y abominé de todo misteriosismo. (99)

It occurred to me that my life would never justify a full or absolute instant, one that would contain all the rest, that they would all be provisory stages, annihilating of the past and facing the future, and that beyond the episodic, the present, the circumstantial, we weren't anyone. And I abhorred all mysticism.⁵

In the moment of his departure from Europe, site of one of his two origins, and returning to the other "doubly inscribed" origin of Buenos Aires, Borges describes an experience of time in which any return to an origin or even to a previous instant would be impossible. The moment of return is described as a turn into time, in which there is neither a fixed origin nor an end.

In addition to the impossibility of return—to a friend or a country—the experience of time that Borges describes also disrupts any integral sense of self, even in the present. The dissolution or “*nadería*” of personality indicated by the essay’s title is described as an effect of a temporal experience that does not permit any “mysterious” or spiritual sense of self. In a subsequent paragraph, Borges describes how he wanted to “show his entire soul to his friend,” but this intention was interrupted “*de golpe*” by the realization cited above. Sylvia Molloy underscores the fact that the dissolution of personal identity described in the essay occurs facing Buenos Aires: “*en una despedida encarada hacia Buenos Aires*” (“*Flâneuries textuales*” 490). Borges is not returning to Buenos Aires with one-half of his double origins intact, ready to collect on the other half. He notes that all investments (he speaks of “*adobando*” his memories: preserving, as with pickles or meat) are annulled by the nature of temporal existence—the episodic, circumstantial, self-annihilating nature of time that he acknowledges, as if for the first time, on his return to Buenos Aires.

His description of time denies the possibility of any real return, whether to a friend or a site of origin, but it does not propose as an alternative a progressive or an exclusively present-based experience of time. The “annihilating” nature of time does not imply that there is not or that there cannot be any relationship with the past. It is just that there is nothing stable in the past that we can return to, nothing that can be preserved (“*adobado*”), no instant, past or present, that can be “full, absolute, containing of all the rest.” The provisory, episodic nature of time allows for neither progress nor return, but neither does it mean that the episodic present is autonomous. Borges’s anecdote suggests that the present can be hit, disrupted (“*de golpe*”), its fullness reduced to nothing (“*nadería*”). Temporal experience is described as a radically unstable experience, utterly lacking in any form of a ground. The fact that Borges observes this upon his departure from Europe and his return to Buenos Aires suggests that rather than returning to an origin, he is turning toward this experience of time: a turning *in* time and not a turning from time. It is a return in which he experiences the impossibility of any real return, any return to plenitude, anything that would be in any sense “*contenedor*.”

The volumes of poetry that Borges wrote upon his return to Buenos Aires thematize this turn or return. They do not demonstrate a primacy of origins that would ground a sense of identity in the present, but rather show the lack of such a thing and the poet’s coming to terms with this lack. To the extent that Borges traces the names and lines of a sense of belonging in the present or the past, he does so to emphasize the unstable limits of both. This is why he moves from the limit between life and death, past and present in the Recoleta cemetery, where he begins his poems, to

wander the unstable limits of the city's present, the *orillas*. Although Sarlo interprets the figural site of the *orillas* as yet another ground of dual origin where Borges establishes his sense of identity as rooted in the past, on the edges of the city where a simpler life can still be glimpsed, the *orillas* appear in his work as the unstable limit of identity as it exists in time. Borges's hovering on the limits of time and identity in these poems leads him to consider language's limits as well. Language cannot securely represent the past, present, or a sense of belonging against the annihilating nature of time. If Borges wishes for an identity or a temporal space that would be "full, absolute, containing of all the rest" (that is, an origin), the poems show how he disabuses himself of such a wish. They seem to suggest that it is only by acknowledging loss and our own incomplete nature that we can have any experience with time itself, as historical subjects that can relate to a past, present, and future.

Borges and His (Own) Precursors

Before returning to the poems, I want to make some comments on the volumes in question. Borges published numerous versions of his first three books of poetry, with the first of the three undergoing the most revisions.⁶ In the prologue to the 1969 edition of *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, he insists that he did not rewrite the book: "No he re-escrito el libro" (OP 17). Rather, he claims to have merely "mitigado sus excesos barrocos, . . . limado asperezas, . . . tachado sensiblerías y vaguedades" ("merely mitigated its baroque excesses, . . . polished rough spots, . . . cut sensibilities and vagueness"). In other words he rewrote it, and he did so a number of times, in such a way that confounds all critical attempts to account for a single text that we can comfortably refer to as *Fervor de Buenos Aires*.

The question is, which version of the book should we read? Should the final version published during Borges's lifetime (in the collection of *Obra poética* from 1977) be considered the definitive version? Or would it be better to return to the original, published in 1923? What should we do with critical essays that were written using versions from the periods in between (such as Sarlo's): are they wrong, to be corrected using a later version of the text? Clearly not. It is as though Borges has represented for his readers the provisory nature of the past in the form of provisory versions of his poetic texts, confounding our critical desire for a single and definitive text.

This problem of literary history resembles the case of the disillusioned lover that Borges relates in "Nueva refutación del tiempo." In that text he describes how the lover who rejects his happy memory because he later found out that his beloved was cheating on him falls into a trap

(OI 176). All states are valid ones, he says: the lover's momentary bliss should not be negated by the later discovery of deception. One state (that of love, or a particular version of a book) is not truer than another, either in a progressive or a regressive sense. Just as the lover should not discount his former happiness because of the later discovery of infidelity, the former versions of a book or poem should not be entirely discounted because of later revisions, but neither can we disregard later versions in a regressive search for the original or definitive text. Borges remarks in *Discusión* that "el concepto de texto definitivo no corresponde sino a la religión o al cansancio" ("the concept of a definitive text corresponds only to religion or fatigue," D 106).

The fact that all versions of *Fervor de Buenos Aires* bear the date 1923 poses a different kind of problem. If we are thinking linearly, and want to compare the early period of Borges's work to his development in later years, or if we are thinking in terms of contemporaneity and what it means that he wrote this book in the sociopolitical or literary-cultural context of the 1920s, what does it mean if we cannot locate the text exclusively in that period because of its multiple rewritings? As Borges himself will say time and again, the idea that time progresses linearly and that there is one time for everyone is false, and this is particularly true or particularly easy to see in the case of literary history. The date of publication always bears an indeterminate relation to the literary text. Borges's tendency to rewrite his texts forces us to confront this indeterminacy, the ultimately unfixable nature of his body of writing. The year 1923, as the designated publication date of a book that Borges wrote three or four times at different points in his life, becomes more like a memory, subject to all kinds of revisions, personal and otherwise, than a fixed date in time. Of course this does not mean that we cannot consider the relationship of Borges's text, dated 1923 (and the subsequent books of poetry dated 1925 and 1929, and similarly rewritten in later editions), to what was going on in the 1920s, or to what the 1920s may have meant in Borges's life. But we should do so with caution, taking the texts dated from the 1920s less as a cultural product from that decade than a lengthy reflection on that period.

I have come to the conclusion that all versions of the poems dated from the 1920s are valid, and simultaneously so. The simplicity of some of the earlier versions of the poems does not invalidate the more sophisticated nature of some of the later versions, and vice versa. It is not necessary, nor even always possible (the early editions are difficult to find), to read the different versions, but to the extent that we do, it is better to consider the strange web of texts that has come down to us in their shifting totality than to try to order and eliminate certain versions and figure

out which ones to privilege. That privileging occurs by default, based on the later texts that are more available to us, which is also the way that Borges intended for it to be. We read primarily the latest versions, with hints of the earlier texts peeking through, either due to citations of those versions in critical texts or out of a curious look at an earlier edition.

Finally I want to say about my reading of *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, and to a lesser extent *Luna de enfrente* and *Cuaderno San Martín*, that I am always in some sense reading them as texts that, as Borges said on several occasions, prefigured in a “secret” sort of way the rest of his work.⁷ This is another reason why I believe it is important to consider the different versions of the texts and not stick to just one, since if *Fervor de Buenos Aires* in some sense influenced or was an expression of what came later, then certainly what came later also had its influence on it, much as Borges says of creative precursors in “Kafka y sus precusores.” Just as each author “creates his own precursors,” Borges has also created, and recreated numerous times, his own precursive texts (OI 109). Here, as in many other places, it is impossible to distinguish origin and copy, originality and influence. Furthermore, regarding Borges’s statement that *Fervor de Buenos Aires* prefigured his later work, it is commonly accepted that this book—in its various manifestations—is remarkably inferior to some of his later work, particularly the fictions. Even though I think it safe to say that Borges was a far better narrator than he was a poet, as he himself admits in the epigraph to his *Obra poética*,⁸ my objective here is to read the early poetry with an eye to the complexity of the best of his later work. This is not always easy to do, since some of the poems are quite trite, but I have come to believe that the triteness that is left in the later versions (the worst of it is edited out) is left as a curiosity, one of Borges’s collector’s items, that provides an ironic commentary on a *criollismo* that is ultimately left without a ground to stand on.

Sepulchral Rhetoric

As we have seen, Sarlo argues that the first poem of *Fervor de Buenos Aires* serves to establish an ideological ground on which Borges will assert his sense of identity and cultural legitimacy. She suggests that “La Recoleta” represents not only Borges’s line of belonging to the past, but also to the future: it is the place of his ancestors and also the “place in which they will have to bury me.” It is a ground, then, that would be fundamentally “contenedor,” representing not only Borges’s and the city’s origins, but also a conception of history that is determined by the ground from which it comes and to which it will return. In this interpretation of

the poem, the cemetery serves as a nearly literal representation of what Piglia has termed an “onomastic index.” However, I want to propose that the poem reveals that the ground that Borges contemplates in the Recoleta cemetery is no more stable than the one that Piglia describes. And if the cemetery leads the poet to consider a certain figure of history that is rooted in the past and going toward a knowable end, it is one that he ultimately rejects.

The poem begins with the kind of reverence one might expect before a monument to the ground of history. It describes a “we” who upon entering the cemetery, slow down and lower our voices in reverence for the “certainties” of death.

Convencidos de caducidad
 por tantas nobles certidumbres de polvo,
 nos demoramos y bajamos la voz
 entre las lentas filas de panteones,
 cuya retórica de sombra y de mármol
 promete o prefigura la deseable
 dignidad de haber muerto. (OP 21)⁹

Convinced of decrepitude
 by so many noble certainties of dust,
 we slow down and lower our voices
 between the slow rows of pantheons,
 whose rhetoric of shadow and marble
 promises or prefigures the desirable
 dignity of having died.

Our certainties about death are the result both of our own desire to imagine a peaceful and dignified end to mortal time and the cemetery’s own “rhetoric,” which promises and prefigures this desirable end. And yet in spite of the grandiose solidity of the cemetery’s rhetoric, the representation of death as a solid entity is on shaky ground. Shadows punctuate the marble’s solidity in what amounts to a rhetorical device of contrasts, although its description, a “retórica de sombra,” suggests that it is also based on the very thing the pantheons hope to conceal. But the real problem, the poem tells us, is that the grandiloquence of the cemetery, the aspiration to solidity, is based on dust. The rhetorical certainties that we find so convincing are “certidumbres de polvo.”

The rhetoric of the cemetery, the poem continues, “el desnudo latín y las trabadas fechas fatales” (“the naked Latin and the engraved fatal

dates”) of the epitaphs, works to hide this dust, which is the dust of history. The cemetery’s representation of history is of a “historia . . . detenida y única” (“detained and unique history”), written in the cemetery’s “lentas filas” (“slow rows”) as an opposition between “mármol” and “flor.” It is a representation that contrasts permanence with the ephemeral, a frozen image of history with what the poem calls “los muchos ayeres de la historia” (“the many yesterdays of history”). The rhetoric of the “lentas filas de panteones” also represents linear time, the sepulchral lines of progressive history, which “promises or prefigures” death as a definite end (“fin”).

Convinced by this discourse, we accept its teleology and desire the promised end. But this is an error: “Equivocamos.” We can desire a solid ground and a definitive end, but for us “sólo la vida existe” (“only life exists”). This may sound like a naive assertion, but it is more complex than it first appears. The cemetery space aims to fix past lives into an eternal representation in death, submitting the ongoing nature of time to an unchanging spatial organization, but life, like death, cannot be detained in such a form of representation. The poem suggests that space and time are parts of life, “formas suyas,” as is, surprisingly, death. They are tools that we use to understand the world, but like our own lives, they are mortal, and they extend and disperse in ways that we can never quite control or anticipate. Life in this poem both escapes and invades the cemetery’s ordered space: it is asleep in the ivy that climbs the cemetery’s walls, filtered in the tree’s shadows, aloft on the wind, and infused in an “alma que se dispersa en otras almas” (“soul that disperses into other souls,” OP 22).

The poet remarks that it is hard to imagine such uncontained and expansive life coming to an end, but life is nevertheless haunted by thoughts of death: not in the contained way that the cemetery tries to represent it, but as an “imaginaria repetición [que infama] con horror nuestros días” (“imaginary repetition that infames our days with horror”). The possibility of death disrupts or “infames” our temporal life in a repeated encounter with mortality that contrasts significantly with the cemetery’s neat representation of a dignified end, the promise and prefiguration of detained time. One such imaginary repetition is the occasion for this poem, the poet’s visit to the cemetery where he assumes he will be buried. Repetition resonates in the name “Recoleta,” and is doubly stressed in the earlier version of the poem that Sarlo cites: “Lo anterior: escuchado, leído, meditado, / lo resentí en la Recoleta, / junto al propio lugar en que han de enterrarme.”¹⁰ Here the poet “resente”—resents or feels with pain, but also feels or perceives again (“re-siente”)—an anteriority, at the site that in a later edition of the poem he comes to call “el lugar de mi ceniza” (“the place of my ash”). The ash in the final line of

the final version repeats the “dust” with which the poem began, the ash or dust upon which our “certainties” of life and death are based, and to which they will, as the familiar funereal refrain reminds us, return. The repetitive nature of death infames and provokes horror because it does not stop, it does not reach an end “detenida y única” which can be represented in the sepulchral rhetoric of the cemetery, but is always ongoing and multiple, like the “muchos ayeres de la historia.”

This repetitive, incomprehensible death, which is also life (“sólo la vida existe”), is part of a historicity that is greater than individual, biographical histories. The cemetery’s structure or rhetoric is intended to represent a linear and finite form of history, and also to fix in stone the identities of the individuals buried within its walls; that is to say, to contain the life and death of a person in a name. The cemetery is an onomastic index par excellence. Yet rather than accepting or defending this structure, Borges reveals its limits, indicating a history that is not contained by the engraved names or the “fechas fatales,” and he begins his poems, rather than on the solid ground of his own origins, resolved to “listen to, read, or think” an anteriority that is not comprehended by this kind of sepulchral rhetoric.

The theme of a sepulchral rhetoric reappears several times throughout the poems. In *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, three poems after “La Recoleta” name the theme in their titles: “Inscripción sepulcral” (“Sepulchral Inscription”), “Inscripción en cualquier sepulcro” (“Inscription on Any Sepulcher”), and “Remordimiento por cualquier muerte” (“Remorse for Any Death”). As I will discuss at the end of this chapter, Borges later returns to the theme in *Cuaderno San Martín* in which he includes another poem on the Recoleta cemetery and a poem on the other major cemetery in Buenos Aires, La Chacarita.

“Inscripción sepulcral” is dedicated to the poet’s great-grandfather, and has been used as evidence of Borges’s founding of his poetry in the past,¹¹ but if we read the poem in light of the representation of sepulchral rhetoric in “La Recoleta,” the poem’s significance changes slightly. The poem is a eulogy, but what it eulogizes, the last line tells us, is a bit of ash (“Ahora es un poco de ceniza y de gloria,” OP 29). The echo of the title later in the volume as “Inscripción en cualquier sepulcro” seems to disrupt the clarity of the name’s inscription in the former poem’s epigraph. “Inscripción sepulcral” is dedicated to the poet’s great-grandfather, Colonel Isodoro Suárez, but the later poem suggests that such funerary specificity is futile, since all lives blend into one another after death. Rather than indicating a clear sense of identity (“un índice onomástico”), the name is made to reveal its clumsy materiality: it becomes a relic, like the “desnudo latín” of the Recoleta’s inscriptions. The “temerarious marble,” we are told in “Inscripción en cualquier sepulcro,” risks little more

than the name against the “todopoder del olvido” (“omnipotence of forgetting”), but even that soon disintegrates, and we are left with the title’s indifferent adjective, “cualquier,” “any” or “whichever” (40).

The inscriptions in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* move from the name, in “Inscripción sepulcral,” to the disintegration of the name in “Inscripción en cualquier sepulcro,” to a strange kind of remorse in “Remordimiento por cualquier muerte.” Contrary to the objective of commemorative inscription that seeks to mark the past as property against the all-powerful flow of time, the “remordimiento” in this latter poem is for a kind of theft that a progressive idea of time inflicts on the past or on time itself. The poem functions as a kind of antisepulchral inscription, because rather than trying to capitalize on the past by keeping it fixed and significant for the present, it points out that by ignoring the past or by burying it in contained sites, we are actually denying ourselves access to the future. The poem reads,

Como el Dios de los místicos
de Quien deben negarse todos los predicados,
el muerto ubicuamente ajeno
no es sino la perdición y la ausencia del mundo. (38)

Like the God of the mystics,
whom all predicates would deny,
the ubiquitously foreign dead man
is nothing but the perdition and absence of the world.

The “ubiquitously foreign” dead man, who is also death itself (“el muerto no es un muerto: es la muerte”) represents a loss or absence that must be recognized in life. The present robs this absence when it ignores the past: a past that is not restricted to the orderly rhetoric of a cemetery, but which is an “absent presence” in daily life, in the colors, syllables, and patios previously occupied by the dead. Having robbed time, and greedily trying to keep the present for ourselves (“nos hemos repartido como ladrones / el caudal de las noches y de los días”), our only means of establishing a relationship to the future is by reconnecting to this lost past, by opening up the present to its absence. The indeterminacy of the dead, who cannot be named by either names or predicates and who do not remain in a single point in time, paradoxically represents an access to the future: the dead or death itself is “ilimitado, abstracto, casi futuro” (“unlimited, abstract, almost future”). Our selfish attempts to keep all of time for ourselves has the nefarious effect of closing off not only our connection to the past but also to time in general. Attention to the dead that

still live among us is one way of reconnecting with time, allowing us to reestablish a relationship with the unpossessable realm of the future.

“Remordimiento por cualquier muerte” indicates a relationship to both time and language that is opposed to the Recoleta’s rhetoric. Rather than language that is presumed to contain its represented object, the remorse described by this poem concerns the uncontainability of death, as well as its absent presence in any language that tries to name it. Like the predicates that do not suffice to refer to it, but are the only things that we have, so too our thoughts may belong to the dead, occupied by its ubiquitously strange presence (“Aun lo que pensamos / podría estar pensándolo él”). Such an occupation requires that we reconsider any conception of the present as property, as something properly “ours,” as well as any understanding of representation as something that is able to recall or re-present things from the past for a proper sense of the present.

Life Possessions

In his essay “On Some Motifs on Baudelaire,” Benjamin explains how the understanding of historical experience in the modern era is based on a particular idea of life or lived experience (*Erlebnis*). He notes that from the end of the nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth, philosophy could be classified as “life philosophy,” a category that describes the attempts to establish a concept of “true” experience that was removed from the shock experience of modern, metropolitan life. This concept of life is situated as far away from the present as possible, and is based in the ahistorical world of myths, a pastoral relation with nature, and a poetry that pitted an eternal concept of life against the increasing changes of the modern world. The concept of lived experience is not just restricted to philosophy, Benjamin avers, but describes a constitutive aspect of modern historical consciousness. He relates “lived experience” to Freud’s understanding of consciousness as a means to protect against stimuli, and thereby to a form of experience that has been sterilized of the shocks of the modern world and processed into something that the psyche can comfortably bear. Direct stimulation representing too great a threat to the psyche, what we think of as experience is always already filtered through the screen of consciousness and presented to us as a coherent object.

One of the objectives of this protective consciousness is to order lived experience into a particular kind of historical structure: “Perhaps the special achievement of shock defense may be seen in its function of assigning to an incident a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its contents. This would be a peak achievement of the intellect; it would turn the incident into a moment that has been lived

(*Erlebnis*)” (I 163). Life or lived experience is ordered into a linear, “empty” concept of time, which functions as an additional defense for the psyche. Past experience is kept in the past, safely contained for indexing by what Benjamin, following Proust, calls “discursive, volitional memory” (186). *Erlebnis* refers above all to an experience of the present that leaves the past behind, comfortably ordered into a sense of history, and in which the future is conceived as a mere extension of the present. The “concept of lived experiences” (“Begriff des Erlebnisse,” GS 1.2.615) offers an appearance of wholeness: the universe is conceived as a coherent whole (“Begriff” means concept but also grasp or comprehension) held together by the figure of human life at its center. Outside stimuli are filtered for shock and are internalized into this concept of life experience. Memories are included in this internalizing process. This is the sense behind the German word *Erinnerung*: memory is brought into consciousness and inventoried as what Benjamin calls “dead possession,” something dead or past that is a possession of the living (CP 49).¹²

Emancipation from the “Begriff” of experience would require a relationship with the past that has not been incorporated into a linear and anthropocentric conception of history. This other kind of experience is called *Erfahrung*, which Benjamin describes, against the life philosophers, as the more poetic of the two kinds of experience. *Erfahrung* describes experience that has not been personalized for comfortable use by an autonomous subject. It is experienced as bits and pieces that break through into consciousness, and which cannot be fully incorporated into an appearance of organic wholeness. It concerns a realm of experience that does not grasp a concept of life or a coherent sense of the present. As something that cannot be perceived consciously and directly, *Erfahrung* also presents a problem for representation. It is not at the disposal of voluntary and spontaneous recall, but lies outside the comfortable grasp of memory or representation. This does not mean that this kind of experience cannot be remembered or represented, but it cannot be integrally incorporated into the concept of ongoing *life*.

Against what Benjamin calls “the self-alienation of the person who inventories his past as dead possession” (CP 49), there exists a need to insist on a different kind of deadness, a different kind of past. This is the task, for Benjamin, of the melancholic allegorist. Rather than a concept or “Begriff” that interiorizes memory “at the cost of the integrity of its contents,” the melancholic brooder (*Grübler*) practices a “Zugriff,” a “firm, apparently brutal grasp” on the fragments that lie in his hand (CP 46; GS 1.2.676). Rather than the usual understanding of melancholy as the denial of the passing of time, Benjamin understands melancholy to be a way

of resisting a progressive concept of life in which “things just go on” (CP 50). The melancholic’s strong grip on the pieces of the past is a way for him to interrupt “the course of the world,” and to reveal that what appears to be a single and comprehensive course is in fact fragmentary.

Allegory is an attempt to represent such a process. The allegorist looks to the fissures in the “catastrophe” of ongoing life, and works toward a “destruction of the organic and living—the extinguishing of appearance” (CP 41). Allegory resists a concept of life as a *Begriff* that attempts to file away the pieces of the past to fit its progressive picture of the present. It holds on to the pieces of experience (*Erfahrung*) that are not sterilized and ordered into a progressive, “living” sense of history: “That which is touched by the allegorical intention is torn from the context of life’s interconnections: it is simultaneously shattered and conserved. Allegory attaches itself to the rubble” (38). Melancholic allegory involves a relationship to the past that aims to open a “temporal abyss (*zeitlichen Abgrund*) in things,” which the *Begriff* of progressive history attempts to sew up so it can move on (CP 47; GS 1.2.679).

Benjamin’s explanation of modern allegory is perhaps best exemplified in Baudelaire’s poem “Le cygne.” The poem concerns the poet’s distress at the changing face of Paris, and also invokes the question of loss in general, including “anyone who has ever lost something they will not recover (*retrouve*)” (Baudelaire 107–8). The poem begins at a site of death, a nearly dry riverbed that connects the poet to Andromaque’s ancient grief, and in which the swan of the poem’s title, a symbol of music and poetry, tries in vain to bathe itself. The poet invokes Andromaque, Hector’s widow, as a figure who refused to give up her mourning for her dead husband even when pressured at the cost of her life to marry anew, to get on with things, as Paris itself seems to be doing: “la forme d’une ville / Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d’un mortel” (“the shape of a city / Changes faster, alas! than a mortal’s heart”).¹³ Neither Andromaque nor the poet is seduced by the new: both keep a firm, although not necessarily voluntary, grip on the past. Andromaque, in spite of being encouraged or even obligated to go on with life, remains “bent in ecstasy” over Hector’s empty tomb. The poet observes the changes to Paris but sees beneath its gleaming surfaces the pieces and “blocs” of the old city: “Paris change! Mais rien dans ma mélancholie / n’a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs, / Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie, / Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs” (“Paris is changing! But nothing in my melancholy / has changed! New palaces, scaffolding, blocks, / Old suburbs, everything becomes allegory for me, / And my dear remembrances are heavier than rocks”).

Freud famously argues that melancholy is a dangerous form of grief, because in it the shadow of the lost object falls upon the ego, provoking paralysis (249). Yet at the same time he admits that what the melancholic does not want to let go of is in the last instance quite ambiguous, perhaps not even an object. "It must be admitted," Freud writes, "that a loss has indeed occurred, without it being known what has been lost" (245). The object of Andromaque's mourning, for example, is an absent one and casts no shadow, or is nothing *but* shadow: she mourns leaning over an empty tomb. Rather than mourning for a particular lost object, one that "cannot be lost because it was never possessed" (Agamben, *Stanzas* 20), it is as though she mourns loss itself, or perhaps even the lack of a place for loss in the life she is told she must get on with. What she and the poet, in his different way, hold on to is not the past as "dead possession," but a refusal to accept such a conception of the past, or a history that presses forward, rendering the past dead and irrelevant to a present concept of life. The empty tomb and the blocks that refuse to budge are pieces that resist the sovereignty of the notion of progress. They are rocks that will not wash away in the river of history. Paradoxically, Andromaque's refusal to cease mourning is not a refusal to forget a particular object, but an insistence on the necessity of forgetting in a world that tries to forget forgetting itself. Bent over the empty tomb, Andromaque struggles to mark her husband's loss on her own terms, to allow his death to live on as another side to life.

This holding on to loss *as* loss (and not as an attempt to repossess a lost object) is the objective of allegory. Timothy Bahti highlights one of Benjamin's distinctions between nineteenth-century and Baroque allegory: "In the nineteenth century melancholy displays a different character than it did in the seventeenth. The key to the earlier allegory is the corpse. The key to the later allegory is *Andenken*" (224). The figure of "Andenken"—memory or remembrance, but with the root word "Denken," which means thinking or thought—contrasts with the more immediate experience of death in the Baroque, in which the corpse or skeleton represented in a more visceral form the loss of what once was. In the nineteenth century, it is understood that what "was" was never possessed. Memory does not fall on a decaying body, a fallen representation of what was once whole, but concerns the absence of such a sign or, rather, the sign of such an absence: the empty tomb, or what Bahti calls the "signe" of "Le cygne" (222). In neither the nineteenth century nor the Baroque does melancholy represent an attempt to recover the lost object as possession, to resuscitate the corpse and internalize it (*Erinnerung*) into a life concept, but rather attempts to hold up its absence to life, in what Bahti calls "the unremembering memory (*unerinnernde Andenken*) of loss" (224).

As I have mentioned, “Erinnerung” describes a form of memory that internalizes the past, incorporating it as an integral component of *Erlebnis*. Benjamin writes that one of the special characteristics of consciousness is to situate each remembered component of lived experience “in a precise point in time,” as though on a time line (I 163). This allocation of the remembered incident places it into a structure where it can be retrieved at will, like a library archive or like the “onomastic index” of a cemetery layout in which the dead are mapped out with dates and names. Paradoxically, Benjamin calls the destruction of this structure a historical act (I 162). He says that Baudelaire’s introduction of “blank spaces” into the apparent integrity of life characterized his work as “historical.” This attribution implies that the life concept as it is organized along a time line is consequently *not* historical. By trying to internalize everything and make it part of an integral concept of life, this kind of structure denies the existence of anything outside itself, including history. Breaking up the “organic interconnections” of a progressive life concept and holding on to the resulting fragments and spaces is a way of opening up room for history, like writing or thinking that “remembers unremembering.” By allowing loss to be a part of memory, allegory maintains the other as other, and invites the dead to interrogate “life.”¹⁴

As I have tried to suggest in the first part of this chapter, Borges is more interested in what does not fit into the interiorizing structures of memory and language than in holding on to the past for the purposes of self-legitimation. His poems do not work to create protective structures in which to house identity or a familial sense of legitimacy, as the rhetoric of cemeteries attempts to do, but rather work to acknowledge language’s incapacity to contain the objects it tries to name and to maintain them in a fixed point in time. He is poised in these poems to listen to and read an anteriority (“Lo anterior: escuchado, leído, meditado”) that repeatedly escapes any firm determination. His poetics of re-turning begins with the indication of a past that cannot be named or claimed, either for himself or for language. Rather, through language he wants to open the tombs of the past and introduce the nonground of time (*Abgrund* or abyss) to a present that either wants to ignore the past altogether, or as in the rhetoric of the Recoleta, to entomb it.

Melancholic Fervor

Borges’s Buenos Aires is a world that is traversed by shadows and disturbances, wounds and edges. The city is always on the brink of dissolution or loss, and remembrance and representation are continually

threatened by dismemberment. Borges represents himself walking around Buenos Aires and picking up fragments of memory and experience. As he tries to order these fragments, he repeatedly encounters a temporality that interrupts the attempt to construct any structure of containment, whether of his own subjectivity, the identity of the city, or an autonomous past or present.

“El tiempo está viviéndome” (“Time is living me”) Borges acknowledges in one of his poems (OP 72). His life is not only something that is in time, but is actually “lived” by time. What this means, however, is something of an enigma. In the poem “Final de año,” Borges writes that “The enigma of Time” is not just the sobering idea that we are all mere drops of water in Heraclitus’s river, that time flows on and subjects us to “infinitos azares” (“infinite chances”), but that in spite of this, we have a relationship with the past: the startling miracle that “perdure algo en nosotros” (“something remain[s] in us,” 35). It is a wonder that we have any relationship with the past at all, and yet we do. The dead that our concept of a linear and progressive life “robs” have a way of sticking around in spite of the fact that they may not have any voice in our world. The past does not endure as dead possession, but as a mute reminder of what our ongoing concept of life does not include. As the years rush on, and the calendar pages flip by, “perdur[a] algo en nosotros: inmóvil, algo que no encontré lo que buscaba” (“something remains in us: immobile, something that did not find what it was looking for”). This is an aspect of time that is not included in the “symbolic detail” (“pormenor simbólico”) of calendar time that at the end of the year adds a number to indicate that we have advanced another year. The poem suggests that we are irremediably in time and cannot return to the past, but the past is something that time does not leave behind, and something remains in it that continues to search (“buscar”) in a way that disrupts any sense of a contained and autonomous present.

The poems are full of motifs that represent this kind of return, elements that are not settled into a completed past and are still looking for what they have not yet found. The past never appears as whole, but tends to be recalled in pieces, fragments that the poet’s “ignorancia no ha aprendido a nombrar ni a ordenar en constelaciones” (“ignorance has not learned how to name or order into constellations,” 23). Paratactic lists of remembered objects recur throughout the poems, manifestations perhaps of the “imaginary repetitions” cited in “La Recoleta.” An example of such a list appears in “Líneas que pude haber escrito y perdido hacia 1922” (“Lines I Might Have Written and Lost Around 1922”), the final poem of *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, in which the structure of the poem is based on an enumeration of discrete objects, scenes, and memories:

Silenciosas batallas del ocaso
 en arrebales últimos,
 siempre antiguas derrotas de una guerra en el cielo,
 albas ruinosas que nos llegan
 desde el fondo desierto del espacio
 como desde el fondo del tiempo,
 negros jardines de la lluvia, una esfinge en un libro
 que yo tenía miedo de abrir
 y cuya imagen vuelve en los sueños,
 la corrupción y el eco que seremos,
 la luna sobre el mármol,
 árboles que se elevan y perduran
 como divinidades tranquilas . . . (59)

Silent sunset battles
 in final suburbs,
 always ancient defeats of a war in the sky,
 ruinous dawns that reach us
 from the deserted depth of space,
 as though from the depth of time,
 dark gardens in the rain, a sphinx in a book
 that I was afraid to open,
 and whose image returns in dreams,
 the corruption and the echo that we will be,
 the moon on marble,
 trees that grow and last
 like quiet divinities . . .

The elements that he invokes are familiar motifs in Borges's writing: books from the familial library, the childhood garden, sunsets in the extreme reaches of the city ("últimos" in the temporal as well as spatial sense, before the city is too built-up to see the horizon). The poem presents familiar images of Borges's past, but it does not present the past as a coherent picture. Like the strange title, the past itself seems to have been written and lost, or perhaps lost and then written. The paratactic structure of the poem and the disparate nature of the items invoked represent the past as pieces that poke into the poet's memory, useless pieces that do not get washed away in the movement of time, like the rocks and "old suburbs" of Baudelaire's poem. They do not represent anything whole, and they do not function as a ground for ideological identification. The recollection is made up of echoes and broken memories, the movement of time leaving everything "corrupt" in the sense of "together but broken" (*corruptus*). Based on

later descriptions of these things, we might associate the garden and the books as belonging to the Borges family household, but here they do not belong to anyone. The gardens belong to the rain (“jardines de la lluvia”); the book arguably belongs to the sphinx who represents for the poet an oneiric authority. Other things are so distant that they belong to nobody: sunsets in distant suburbs, “always ancient” defeats, even distant races that, without knowing it, engendered him (“los sajones, los árabes y los godos / que, sin saberlo, me engendraron”). Yet these things, although “lost” and perhaps belonging to no one but time (like the poem itself), do not completely disappear. They return from the depths of time, like the sphinx, to interrogate the poet’s present sense of identity.

At the end of the list of disparate memories and distant elements, the poet asks himself, “¿Soy yo esas cosas y las otras / o son llaves secretas y arduas álgebras / de lo que no sabremos nunca?” (“Am I those things and the others / or are they secret keys and arduous algebras / of what we will never know?”) This question ends the poem and the volume. Am I these things, do these memories, elements, distant occurrences add up to be me? Can they be incorporated into a solid sense of self? It is a question of *Erinnerung* or *Andenken*, interiorizable memory or always external “thought.” The “arduous algebras” or “secret keys” that may not open to anything fully knowable describe a conception of language that is not presumed to contain its object. That Borges poses this question at the end of his first volume of poems with no answer to follow but the end of the page and the end of the book, leads us to consider that the question—and the poem, and perhaps the entire collection—is one of the secret keys to which he refers, posing a question for which we will never have a finite answer. In other words, the poem provides its own negative response. There can be no constitution of an “I” based on the elements of the past; neither language nor memory provides any firm constitution of identity. There is no “I am” available, only an “Am I?” with an abyss for an answer. But it is an abyss, an *Abgrund*, that can be explored in language—in the “llaves secretas y arduas álgebras de lo que no sabremos nunca.”

The relation to the past as a collection or enumeration of objects and memories that do not add up to any particular identity, either a past or present identity, is common to many of the poems. In “El sur,” for example, the remembered parts of a house are compared to the disperse stars, which the poet in his ignorance “has not learned to name or order into constellations” (23). In “Cercanías,” the not-so-close “cercanía” (“closeness”) of old houses is recited piece by piece (patios, windows, bedrooms) until what can be named is declared to be only the “scattering” of affect: “he nombrado los sitios / donde se desparrama la ternura” (“I have named sites / where tenderness is scattered,” 52). At the end of this poem, as