

CHAPTER ONE

First Words

Even at the risk of falling into redundancies from the start, one would have to recognize, once again, the gravitation of quotations in Borges's universe, where, un beholden to time, though without eluding the facts of their origin, quotations allow for the repetition of several discourses at once. On more than one occasion, Borges affirmed the literary fatefulness of his destiny and, assuming that task, recognized the precedence of a writing that cannot avoid the quotation. Literary repetition reiterates and demands the affinities of a shared place, more than shared place, a common place, which—beyond distances and circumstantial differences, and on the basis of verbal coincidences—is conducive to signs of universality.

A balance of unsuspected reciprocities impels us to appreciate and recognize this repetition as a proper practice: if Borges quotes innumerable authors in his works, it should not surprise us that innumerable authors continue to quote Borges. Recourse and recurrence, from one author to the other: literary passion manages to order itself around quotations that animate an inconclusive textual game.

Borges's library multiplies, in parts, the books of others in his books and his in those of others, accumulating the potential of a partial, endless literary play. Reading Borges, one makes out the parts of disparate works, and that shared discovery—a discovery parceled between author and reader—lends itself to more than one meaning. Someone glimpses the revelation of a distant fragment, and comes to be glimpsed in turn. Fragments come and go as if transported by an endless band in which oppositions are knotted and annulled, reconciled by the same passion for quoting.

This back and forth of the quotation replicates the literary ritual, or rituals, of circulating. It is a curious tendency of quotations that they are

quoted, as if each one, once invoked, reserved the imminence of a potential quoting, which is mentioned for its energy, for its efficacy, or simply because it can occur. Its simple occurrence refers it to a previous instance, like to a past time, but pointed toward a text or time to come. It returns to the beginning, only to circle back again.

Despite the secret to which Borges ambiguously refers in his story, the narrator belonging to “The Sect of the Phoenix”¹ knows that this textual reproduction seals literary continuity via the quotation; literal, in silence, the species is not extinguished. In the same way that the sense of this story is doubled, so should we understand the ambivalence of the quotation’s meaning.

These are dualities that Spanish, in its good fortune, does not dissimulate: “cita” [quotation, rendezvous] designates a meeting—more than a meeting—of the text or of the heart, and, as a result of the complicity of this meeting, other passions rush forth. The words of a text mingle and cohabitate in another text and thus do they survive. If it is true that a book does not choose its lectors, it is the “e-lection” that the latter realize that affords the book an unforeseen permanence, beyond the disposition of a presumable authority. Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the century’s most quoted authors should be an unknown author—one who does not exist—of a well-known book—which already existed; the quote legitimates the ambivalencies of its open statute. Borges’s character, Pierre Menard,² consecrated reader and author, writes not another *Quijote* but the *Quijote* of another: letter for letter, word for word, its identical paragraphs authorize a meaning that modifies, according to different versions, a truth in terms. This eventual alteration of the truth is found precisely in a text that deals with truth conditioned by history; the references to the discipline make of the theme and of the discourse that articulates it one and the same hermeneutic question.

This is not an objection, on the contrary; nevertheless, one may observe that, for a long time now, Borges has been quoted too much. It is true that his lines are repeated in other pages and that passages, verses, words to which Borges restored original meaning appear in contexts that reveal, or not, the origin that the poet demands: “Every word was once a poem,”³ and, in the same way that only the word remembers, its reiterated use attenuates the origin.

Repetition is a phenomenon that lacks novelty, as is known; in any case—and this has also been said—novelty is rooted only in the return, which suggests that the recognition of the quotation is especially appropriate—in Borges’s text, with Borges—for the celebration of a centennial.⁴ In its repetition it calls for suspension in a timeless time, a return to a

placeless space that, as the ceremony punctually authorizes, rescinds the circumstances.

If, for Borges, quotations reveal that authors are readers who rewrite what has already been written, those turnings that found and shape his poetics approach the doctrine that Borges shared, according to which Paradise exists under the species of a library. Without departing from it, I would invoke an old maxim belonging to Talmudic interpretations that attribute to the loyalty of the quotation the recuperation of a time that courts eternity. “All who utter the words in the name of the one who uttered them”⁵ not only provoke their own salvation, but also initiate a redemption without end.⁶