

CHAPTER THREE

Paradoxa Ortodoxa

Coincidences are inevitable since we are reading Derrida and Plato on the basis of Borges.

—Emir Rodríguez Monegal,
“Borges and Derrida: Boticarios”

It is said that the pelican so loves her young that she puts them to death with her claws.

—Honorius de Autun, *Speculum de mysteris ecclesiae*

Let us adore without understanding, said the priest.
So be it, said Bouvard.

—Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*

In “Vindication of Bouvard and Pécuchet”¹ Borges considered Flaubert’s work to be a “deceptively simple story”; we could apply a similar consideration to his story “The Gospel According to Mark.”² But the coincidences between Flaubert’s work—an aberration, according to some, “the greatest work of French literature and perhaps of all literature,”³ according to others—and Borges’s story are recognizable as something more than an appearance of shared simplicity. According to Borges, Flaubert makes his characters read a library “so that they don’t understand it,”⁴ they (cornu)copy⁵ it; also in “The Gospel according to Mark,” Borges imagines the problems of a reading that is too loyal and, for this reason, here too the risks of incomprehension should not be discarded.

The story begins by describing the primary narrative circumstances of every introduction (“The deed occurred in the hacienda Los Álamos, in the district of Junín, toward the south, in the last days of the month of March of 1928”⁶), but this observation of conventional “beginnings” constitutes a realist option in two ways: a beginning that adjusts itself to

the most conservative realism, which according to Roman Jakobson is the one on which he models his observations concerning the old canons;⁷ and a minute and chronologically punctual geographic orientation. As far as Borges is concerned, the exaggeration of realist precision can only be a cause for suspicion. Perhaps it is more prudent to define this narration as realist *à outrance*, of an *outré* realism, better yet, an ultrarealism. (We will return to this definition.)

The character, Baltasar Espinosa, a student from Buenos Aires, is found summering at his cousin's hacienda when the storm crashes down, and the estuaries of an unforeseeable river-swell oblige him to remain in the heart of the hacienda, to share it with the foreman and his family—the Gutres—and to turn to the reading of the Gospel in order to attenuate the hostility of a forced conviviality, sidestepping by way of the (re)cited word as much the dubious proximity of dialogue as the discomforts of an inevitable circumspection.

Basically, the narrative situation ends up being quite similar to that of another story: "The Shape of the Sword."⁸ In this piece as well the story transpired in a hacienda, La Colorada, it was called (although, as we may read in the previous quote from the edition of the complete works, the hacienda from "The Gospel According to Mark" is called "Los Álamos," in the first version it appears as "la Colorada"; the coincidence of the proper name cannot be ignored). But other, less striking similarities may be registered as well: the city/country opposition; inundation and isolation; involuntary closeness; the precarious Spanish of those living in the hacienda; the resistance to dialogue; the change and accumulation of narrative functions brought about by the participation of a character who takes on another narration and introduces in this way a second, distant—biblical or historical—diegesis. That introduction is crucial in that it unleashes an exchange of fundamental narrative functions: narrator for narratee; reader for characters, slippages that stratify the narration in chiasmata, weaving it into two crossed planes: in superposition and opposition, because the structure of "the circular ruins" is not only the fundamental literary articulation of the imaginative archeology of Borges but also the evidencing—by its narrative, by its poetics—of the referential fracture, the inevitability of breakdown through the phenomenon of signification. Representation as the point where the abyss opens: the sign is the origin of other signs, said Peirce, recognizing the il-limitation of semiosis as the path that, by way of the breakdown, precipitates the infinite:

One—which?—looked at the other
Like he who dreams he is dreaming.⁹

More than the common place of the Borgesian imaginary, these interlaced slippages reveal duality as a necessary condition of any literary text that, according to Derrida, prefigures its own deconstruction: presence for absence, absence for presence, truth for fiction: "any truth would be an illusion of which one forgets that it is an illusion," said Nietzsche, and there is no need to be surprised; "such truths do exist."¹⁰

The word installs a strategy of initiation; it is the origin, according to John, where all begins, but it would also be that revelation that begins the Apocalypse; from the beginning, the first word, "apocalypse" evokes the end: the revelation/destruction, origin and catastrophe, origin of the catastrophe, the word "apocalypse" initiating the Apocalypse recuperates the ambiguity that the mere mention convokes. "Je parle, donc je ne suis pas" (I speak, therefore I am not), Maurice Blanchot could have said.¹¹ If Peirce said "to know a sign is always to know something else," it would not be abusive to understand from this that to know a sign is always to know something different, something opposite. This is what Umberto Eco reiterates: "Starting from the sign, one goes through the whole semiotic process and arrives at the point where the sign becomes capable of contradicting itself (otherwise, those textual mechanisms called 'literature' would not be possible)."¹²

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF WRITING

Litré dealt them the coup de grace affirming that there had never been a positive orthography and that there couldn't be one either. For this reason they arrived at the conclusion that syntax is a fantasy and grammar an illusion.

—Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*

In "Plato's Pharmacy," Jacques Derrida questions the contradictions that from antiquity to structuralism without interruption have denigrated the function of writing. He starts from Socrates, "he who does not write," who in *Phaedrus* traces the doubts as to the benefits of writing back to a remote Egyptian past. His contradictory ambivalence makes suspect Plato's claims about this invention of Theuth, and—even though his suspicion remains written—he does not hesitate to suspect a remedy that, created for the benefit of memory, damages it as much as it assists it; a *pharmakon*, at once remedy and poison, fixes and destroys it at the same time. "Because writing has neither an essence nor a value of its own, whether positive or negative. It acts in its simulacrum and mimes in its type, memory, knowledge,

truth.¹³ It is not truth because it imitates it; it is not knowledge but appearance; it is not memory but its fixation; nor the word because it silences it. Derrida deconstructs that logocentric obsession that tries to ignore the relevance of writing: its *reserve*. Nevertheless, it is that discretion and accumulation, disposition and prudence, that makes of its virtuality a virtue. Against time, writing fixes itself; it spatializes discourse, initiating controversy, giving way to an infinite textual openness: in this abyssal space time does not count. Reading departs from there, it withdraws (*se aparta*): "Reading has to begin in this unstable conmixture of literalism and suspicion"¹⁴ and, when it is valid, it deconstructs it: "Reading [. . .] if strong is always a misreading,"¹⁵ Harold Bloom contradicts himself, and this contradiction legitimizes the *potency* of interpretation, its power: the power to be; its possibility: the multiplication of a truth to the "nth" version. Neither literal nor notarial, concerning meaning there is no *property* but rather *appropriation* and confrontation; "the will to the contrary," which could be attributed to Nietzsche, is the condition and passion of the text. "Je suis le sinistre miroir // où la mégère se regarde"¹⁶ (I am the sinister mirror // in which the harpy looks at herself), as if spoken by writing about itself, demanding a first person who is— "Thanks to voracious irony"¹⁷—subject and object of interminable contradictions. "I will speak of a letter"; thus Derrida declares the initiation of *differance* (these are the first words with which "Différance" begins), imposing in this way the introduction of the Derridean order: the letter as primordial referent, the letter that precedes speech: Derrida speaks of the letter.

From its origin—it was Theuth who invented it, either Theuth or Hermes or Mercury or Wotan or the great magician Odin, inventor of runes, god of war and god of poets; through writing the text debates; it is a debate, or it is not a text. Writing is fixed in a dual space, on the bias, between an inside and an outside, between imagination and reflection, between silence and silence, a space beyond, of transference and tergiversation, where it (ex)poses itself in curious evidence, impugning "the fundamental epistemological metaphor: understanding as seeing,"¹⁸ the flight of meaning, the fault through which it slips out, the failure that is neither error nor lack but rather an obstinate will to know and to be the truth.

TO HEAR ONESELF OR TEAR ONESELF AWAY: WHERE TO?

What did "the abyss that broke" and "the waterfalls from heaven" mean in Genesis? Because an abyss does not break and heaven has no waterfalls! [. . .] You must

remember, said Bouvard, that Moses exaggerated demonically.

—Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*

Oral discourse takes place in time, with time, like time, and these coincidences dissimulate in fluidity the abysmal breakdowns of meaning, reduce interpretive possibilities, limit them, eliminating disconcert by a sort of certainty: I understand because I hear, an epistemological metaphor always more disputable albeit accepted. The suspicious Francophone plausibility of *entendre* confounds comprehension with audition, sense with the sensed, truth with presence, presence with the voice: "And all the people are seeing the voices," the scriptures say,¹⁹ and John, for his part, transcribed the revelation of that strange vision: "Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me,"²⁰ as if the voice were sufficient: seeing in order to hear, hearing in order to believe, are what counts as evidence. "For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God. . . ."²⁷ But neither does ignorance guarantee that knowledge, as Pécuchet could have reasoned, Pécuchet who, excited by his recent erudition, had begun a record of the Bible's contradictions, even though he would not have proposed to deconstruct them.

The Gutres of Borges's story were illiterate, they barely knew how to speak; Roberto Paoli speaks of their "almost zoological regression."²² The readings of *La Chacra*,²³ of the veterinarian manual, of *The History of the Shortboms in Argentina*, or of *Don Segundo Sombra*, that Baltasar Espinosa tried to present them did not interest them. The triviality of the stories was not distinguishable from those they lived every day: on the contrary, when dealing with the country, they preferred their own adventures as cattlemen. In reality there was no difference. Nevertheless, when he began to read the *Gospel According to Mark*, "perhaps to see if they understood anything [. . .], he was surprised that they listened to it with attention and then with hushed interest. [. . .] It reminded him the elocution classes he had received in Ramos Mejía and he stood up to preach the parables."²⁴ Espinosa proceeds like Mark: he does not limit his version to referring to deeds but rather preaches while dramatizing them: to be precise, his discourse converts the tale into action.

The naive attention of his listeners was foreseeable. They are listening for the first time to a tale; that tale refers to the story of Jesus Christ; the initiation could not be better. Furthermore, the circumstances of this reading reinforce credulity: they hear, they do not read. More still than the philosophical arguments of Plato, of Rousseau, or of Saussure, objected to by Derrida, mentioned so often by the deconstructivists, the live reading of revealed truth concentrates in *logos* its privileged polysemy. The

eloquent conviction of Borges's character sums up the differences, in his voice is everything: reason, thought, knowledge, word, sacred word, the word of God. For these listeners—who are also unaware of the works of deconstruction—the logocentric priority is verified once again as the coincidence of voice and presence: truth in person. Logos as origin and foundation of being converts the Gutres, converts their credulity into credence. In "The Gospel According to Mark," Borges presents a sacred parody of conversion via the word: the revealed logos reveals, mediating between man and things, erasing the differences between nature/culture, country/city, barbarity/civilization. Perhaps Borges would have shared the fantasy that Walter Benjamin creates on the basis of *Angelus Novus*—a painting made by Paul Klee that belonged to him—as to the determining force of names that, in addition to representing the secret personal identity of the individual, conditions his or her biography and work.

Barthes does not exaggerate when he understands the disposition to write (a "mise en writing" we could say) to begin when Proust finds or invents proper nouns: "Once this system was found, the work wrote itself immediately."²⁵ It is not only for Proust that the class of proper nouns—the Name—presents "the greatest constitutive power." Cratylus²⁶ was already suspicious of a kind of onomastic Platonism that might as well be a patronymic, which, beyond designative singularity, more than the name of the Father that gives name to a family, configures a model that anticipates and determines nature and essence with different fates: "The proper Name is, in this way, the linguistic form of reminiscence."²⁷

In poetic matter, the proper noun is not a meaningful hole but rather the very gesture of *vocation*,²⁸ the voice on the basis of which starts the process of gestation as a presence and a concomitant absence, since every vocation implies its opposite, and in-vocation, the appellation of an absence. Just as Barthes affirms that it is possible to say, poetically, that Proust's entire oeuvre emerged from a few names, we can risk the attribution of "that catalysis of an infinite richness"²⁹ to the proper name of the author who motivates³⁰ the work or rather—and it is not different—*motivates* by way of the work the name: "The author of Percival would be 'a Christian of Troy?',"³¹ Lautréamont would be the pseudonym of the other of Montevideo, in French, l'autre à Montevideo? Jorge Luis Borges would be the man on the border, an oxymoron between two spaces, the countryside, like in the Georgics, and the city as in the boroughs? The story's theme alludes to this confrontation.

If, in ordinary language, different from the common noun, the proper noun attains regularly to a particular designation, extracting itself in that way from the universality of the concept, in literary space the

expansion of meaning comes to recuse the linguistic statute of the proper name and, with a double edge, becomes more proper³⁷ and more universal than ever. As literary interpretation aims to discover or invent meanings, this practice takes advantage of the semantic void in order to fill it with the greatest signification. In this way, from an a-semantic extreme, and authorized by textualization—by the operations that appropriate and are appropriated by the text—proper nouns slip easily toward a meaningful plenum. The onomastic motivation that the author attributes to his characters extends beyond the text and contaminates with meaning the proper name of the author too, who does not belong to the text itself, although he configures its constitutive frame. Everything comes to signify, as much the textual center as its borders. From the same zone, marginal and anterior to the work, Leopoldo Lugones inserts between the prologue and his poems the epigraph of *El lunario sentimental*, illustrating by way of the title the "nobility" of a procedure that, within the literary species, categorizes the proper noun above both the common and the proper:

In the old days
The Lugones were called Lunones
Because these men came
From Great Castle, and wore
The moon on their heralds.
[Tirso de Avilés, *Blasones de Asturias*]³³

When the literary condition is recognized the verbal movement is interesting, and it is double. For the poetic word, the author or interpreter claims two attributions: he or she makes proper the common noun and common the proper noun. Also inspired by "French reflections," Geoffrey Hartman formulates the hypothesis that the literary work constitutes the elaboration of a specular name, the proper.³⁴ Borges—Georgie to his friends—celebrates in his work a name that recalls both the agricultural labors of the *Georgics*, and the boroughs, or towns, and their echoes, reuniting the extremes. When one mentions to him such a determination, he is also delighted by the specular coincidences of his name and its literary consequences.

Different from other "read readers" (subject and object of reading, who read and are read),³⁵ the characters of "The Gospel According to Mark" are not properly readers because, assigning all privilege to the voice, they do not observe the silent condition of reading. Double error: neither voice of presence nor silence of reading. A case not foreseen by

Plato but that Borges encounters, records, invents. Borges and his own invent-ory, "Borges, the apothecary."³⁶

This privilege of the *phoné* is not fortuitous. In *De la grammatologie*, Derrida attributes it to a "*s'entendre parler*" (hear oneself speaking, understand oneself speaking) where the immediacy of discourse, the evanescence of the oral word, the intangible properties of the phonic substance have brought about the confounding of the oppositions concerning the signifier as nonexternal, nonmaterial, nonempirical, noncontingent, capable of direct access to thought, to truth, an immediacy that neutralizes differences between outside/inside, visible/intelligible, universal/nonuniversal, transcendent/empirical.

A LITERAL DIFFERENCE

How to transmit to others the infinite Aleph that my
fearful memory barely grasps?

—Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph*

One letter alone can contain the book, the universe.

Edmund Jabès, *Ça suit son cours*

In an earlier piece,³⁷ apropos of some narrative contrasts between "The Aleph" and "The Zahir," I tried to observe the extremes of an alphabetic order capable of reducing the initial totality of the orb to the wastes of a final fixity. I quoted Gershom Scholem, who defines the aleph "as the spiritual root of all letters and of that from which derive all the elements of human language,"³⁸ an aspiration that anticipates the articulation of sound, but implicated by the Borgesian imaginary. That "aspiration" of the aleph exceeds its literal rootedness. Without negating its nature (phonetic or physiological), aspiration extends to another form of realization, is understood as a wish, the breath of a desire, the profound aspiration, the "inspiration" that animates. The aleph is, at least, a double aspiration: a respiratory movement, a movement of the soul. Generator of energy, anterior and initial, the aleph identifies two instances of one and the same principle, instances that cipher the double key of the origin,³⁹ the place where the text begins: the key of aperture and a key that—as in the score—registers the interpretation, because in interpretation are found the aperture and the key. Wish and aspiration, principle and key, soul and life; I am not loathe to read in the aleph a form of totality. Edmond Jabès did not refer to the *aleph* but to the *a*, and although he does not express it,

perhaps he had already speculated about these transcendent coincidences of the aleph when he defines the difference that Derrida notes, or takes note of. Without naming it, he warns: "So is it that in the word difference (*différence*), a letter, the seventh, was exchanged for the first letter of the alphabet, in secret, silently, Sufficient for the text to be another,"⁴⁰ or for the text to be.

In the same way as Derrida, Edmond Jabès does not formulate simply a claim for writing, but rather, recognizing its emergence, he deconstructs the illusion that impedes our distinguishing among logos-truth-presence. In French, the substitution is neither heard nor said; it is hardly even written: *différence/différance*, and in that operation—substitution without suppression—is verified its *relevance*. The *a* for the *e*. More than substitute, the preposition multiplies: $a \times e$, a substitution that multiplies the meaning of the word. It produces a dissemination of meaning that, because of it, shimmers and shatters, dispersing univocal interpretation, disarticulating definitively whatever definition. There is no origin, nor center, nor end; whatever solution, whatever exit is illusory, or pure theory.

In difference deconstruction is concretized, without distinction (a form of differing), without displacement and postponement (another form of differing), the writing is a dead letter or a letter that kills, as the Gospel says.

PROPHECY OR PROVOCATION?

Who can tell the dancer from the dance?

—W. B. Yeats, "Among School Children"

Some time ago, when I proposed a hypothesis concerning the silence required by a text, I noted the paradoxical condition of literary reading, a contradictory activity that repeats and is silent.⁴¹

In Borges's story, a reader, the reader of the Gospel—and his *lecturaries*⁴²—transgress that silent condition of reading and, by reading out loud, suspend the difference, thereby provoking logocentric fascination: the word, the logos, the divine word, are identified in presence.

Borges's theological exercises weave another atrocious version of literary passion: high fidelity puts reading at risk. Because of faith, because of identification, the fidelity manifested by his characters is at least doubled; the risk as well.

In a certain way, the Borgesian material conforms to the cycle of evangelical narration: just as Mark recounted what Peter had recounted, so does Espinosa recount what Mark recounted.

By way of the out-loud reading of the Gospel, Baltasar Espinosa, "whose theology was uncertain,"⁴³ Borges says, consummates a precarious con-substantiation. To his eyes, to those of his lectaries, that voice is no longer to be distinguished from that of Christ nor from his presence. Because of that same precarious union, neither are the Gutres to be distinguished from his executioners. One cannot be surprised, by the end of the work, by another crucifixion. "Espinosa understood what awaited him on the other side of the door."⁴⁴

The characters do not speak, they do not speak to one another. "The genuine logos is always a dia-logos."⁴⁵ But the discourse of Espinosa, his presence, the conviction of his voice, revokes the hiatus of representation, constitutes an efficient *effet de réel*: none of the characters conceives of the difference. The reading of the Gospel is a mirror in which the characters fix themselves in order to *identify themselves*. Specular, or spectacular, identification is, once again, a frustrated interpretation.

Borges had already said enough. In "The Gospel According to Mark," as in "Of Rigor in Science,"⁴⁶ the more faithful the representation the more it sabotages the reference; fidelity perpetrates another "perfect crime" and, only because it is perfect, it does not know itself; if there existed a perfect reading it would mean the end of literature. The Gutres do not know the duality of the word; the presence of Espinosa, his voice, dissimulates his absence, suspends the inevitable duality that representation encloses. The reading they realize is the most innocent, the most guilty.

The word brings along its contrary: a message of civilization/barbary, of life/death, of goodness/cruelty, of truth/lie.

What law orders this "contradiction," this internal opposition of the spoken against writing, a spoken that is spoken against itself from the moment that one writes, writes his identity in himself and extracts his identity against this depth of writing? This "contradiction," which is nothing but the relation of diction opposing itself to inscription, is not contingent,⁴⁷

but neither is his warning new.

Given that contrariness, interpretation cannot fail to be ironic:

Most things are not the ones one reads, one no longer understands bread for bread, but for earth: nor wine for wine, but for water, since even the elements are ciphered in elements. What could men be? Where you think there to be substance, all is circumstance, and that which seems to be the most solid is a hole,

and all holes are empty: only women seem what they are and are what they seem. How can that be, replied Andrenio, if they are all, from head to toe, nothing but one lying sycophancy? I will tell you; because most of them seem bad, and really are: such that it is necessary that one be a very good reader in order not to read everything backward.⁴⁸

"This was and was not." Roman Jakobson tells us that this was the usual exhortation with which the Mallorcan storytellers introduce their narratives.⁴⁹ "WALK DON'T WALK." I transcribe the sign of the traffic light that, both illuminated, detain or hurry along the walking of the characters in George Segal's sculpture, the group of plaster, wood, metal, and electric light that is to be found in the Whitney Museum in New York. It makes no sense. The work, like the world, has only various senses or contradictory meanings, or else it has none.

"The allegory of reading narrates the impossibility of reading,"⁵⁰ says Paul de Man apropos of the allegorical requirements urged by Proust's narrator. From which we may derive that comprehension, as an aesthetic response, is either produced through difference, or is not produced at all. "Plus tard j'ai compris" (later I understood), Marcel repeatedly confesses; comprehension implies a postponement that the simultaneity (or instantaneity) of presence suspends.

THE ULTRAREALISM OF BORGES

Coleridge observes that all men are born Aristotelians or Platonists. The latter feel that classes, orders, and genres are realities; the former, that they are generalizations; for these, language is nothing other than an approximate play of symbols; for those, it is the map of the universe.

—Borges, *Otras inquisiciones*

Borges does not deny the initiatory property of logos. His story deconstructs it: nothing remains safe from the contradictions. Neither salvation nor order, as we already know. The Word *orders* chaos; it concludes or *institutes* it. The confusion is rooted in the nature of the word itself, which is the origin of the troubled compatibility of presence/absence, identity/difference, universal/particular. Narration exacerbates it all the more when it has narration as its theme. Confused from the beginning—there begins Apocalypse—it is already impossible to distinguish the initiation—

the beginning—from the end; the revelation does not finish with the catastrophe; in the telling it convokes it.

Displacing a dialogue that the characters could not establish, the words of the Gospel constitute a strange quote, they penetrate the situation, they superimpose themselves on that reality but do not discard another contradiction: without failing to be an *act* (they configure a quite debatable “speech act”), they would also be its *model*. From which we may conclude that, as Borges comments apropos of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, “the action does not occur in time but rather in eternity,”⁵¹ a reflection that would also correspond to his story.

Within the literary frame installed by Borges’s narrative statute, the reading of the Gospel reconciles at once model and realization: “The individual is in some way the species, and the Keats’s nightingale is also Ruth’s nightingale,” Borges says in *Otras Inquisiciones*,⁵² and it is that coincidence that justifies the reflection that I transcribe as an epigraph.

Even without intending it, every reading approaches an appropriation of the text. As for the author, so too for the reader—although in a less troublesome form—the page is the target of the one who *writes* his own meaning/a proper meaning. But, in the same way as occurs to the characters of “The Gospel According to Mark,” in the *propriety* of the reading is confounded the rigor of literalness (and I do not avoid here the associations of cruelty and hardness) and the search for a truth as meaning, a second propriety that consists of making meaning proper/own, usurping it.

In Borges’s story, literalness is a literary fiction: interpretive abstinence—a search for pure or primary meaning. It is the first interpretive abuse, an impossible refinement that makes room for two aspects of one and the same austerity; without interpretation (only a matter of a naive conjecture), loyalty and fidelity, which try to appear as the manifestation of faith, the observation of literal truth, give way to an authoritarian rigidity where once again “The letter kills and . . .”⁵³ And once again propriety is more arbitrariness than exactitude.

This contradictory ambivalence of the word and its properties constitutes the very statute of the word, the duality of a nature far from simple. Each mention refers at least two times, since while referring to a particular individual it never ceases referring to an archetype, a universal. One could explain this ambivalence by considering the old neo-Platonic contribution of the distinction later established by Peirce when he opposed *type* and *token*. He indicated for each word the possibility of recalling a type (the *legisign* of the luxuriant Peircean nomenclature) and a particular object (the *sinsign*, in this case), such that each word registers two memories, remembers two registers. But not only this. The word *token* is particularly felicitous because, apart from the sixteen substantive

forms the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines for it, on the basis of its relation with *type* it weaves a semantic network that gathers up the folds of its signification. The *token* is, among other things, a *password*, a *mot de passe*, a safe conduct that trespasses through planes and, in that passage, allows the *token* to be seen in the *type* and vice versa. Different from Saussure’s sign, the *token* is a *sign* that, without discarding the meaning of *evidence*, of something that is there, expresses, at the same time, the sign as footprint, the sign of something that existed and, as well, the sign insofar as it is a *presage* of a prodigy to come; the sign in all times, something that presents itself as a “memory,” a present—a gift—offered especially to someone about to leave. Because of it the tenses appear superimposed.⁵⁴

Borges’s is not *the Gospel According to Mark* but “The Gospel According to Mark,” and the precise mention of the article, from the title, initiates the process of actualization. The reading actualizes the text: from ideal to real, from possibility to action, from archetype to particular type, from a past to a present, on the basis of an original, the copy; but in this case, the copy is also an origin.

Referred to by the narrator-character, the biblical recitation appears “en-abîme.” Model of action, it reflects itself in the story as in a mirror, faithful and inverted, and in this way the *paradoxes* begin to appear. Part of the text, the characters do not imitate a historical reality but rather another textual reality. The realist illusion of the tale does not attain to an imitation of the real but to a system of transtextual verisimilitude. Neither the mirror that hung along the way and of which Stendhal spoke, nor the life that imitates art, as Oscar Wilde preferred. If the story turns out to be verisimilar, this impression is produced because the interpretation occurs *between* texts. This *between* is the hole through which another form of reading falls. The anxiety of influence—a title from Harold Bloom—appears as the necessity of formulating at least a transtextual legitimization. Writing—sacred, in this case—guarantees a narrative event that, without the prestige of such a precedent, would lack not a little credibility.

One diegesis generates another diegesis: the metaleptic⁵⁵ slippage does not appear to occur outside the boundaries. Because of its literary nature it is natural for the character-reader to find inscribed, in the book he or she reads, his or her archetype, “like a shadow of the things to come,” as Paul says apropos of the affirmations that, in the Old Testament, announce the events of the New. That is the depth of reality, a reality that is beyond, an ultrareality that—also for this reason—adds itself to the realist exaggerations of the outset.

Here as well literal reading is a risk; a fixation of writing is produced, an obsession contains a strange metamorphosis. As in Cortazar’s story,⁵⁶

in "The Gospel According to Mark" the reader turns into a larva, an *axolotl* that identifies with itself, problematically, because it no longer distinguishes between who watches and is watched.

The book read in the book repeats itself as in a mirror (in a similar book) and en-abîme (in a different space). Like Don Quijote, like Emma Bovary, like Bouvard and Pécuchet, it is the fidelity of reading, literal, without difference (writing without writing: a coincidence), which determines its own mishaps, those proper to literary readers. Everything occurs between equals. It is Virgil who leads Dante in his *Inferno*. If, as Derrida says, there is no "*hors-texte*," there must necessarily without *hors-texte* be an inside-text. Like *Lancelot du Lac*, the "Galeotto"⁵⁷ that facilitated the love between Paolo and Francesca, the *Gospel* is origin and model, the archetype of a fatal relation between characters.

EITHER THE LETTER OR THE CIPHER

Among books there is no exit. If the characters try to extract themselves from the calamities of their situation by means of reading, that extraction is a plot and a trap: as if, by duplicating itself, the fiction were to negate itself. The text within the text establishes a curious transtextuality; by way of a play of mirrors it creates a flight toward profundity, but also an edge, a look out point over the abyss. The "illusion of reality" is not formed by imitating reality but by reiterating the literary condition: "One is never, then, simply in literature. The problem is posed by the structure of the edge: the edge is not certain, because it does not cease to be divided."⁵⁸

The story begins before beginning since here as well, in the beginning is the Word, not chaos. The title, gospel, announces what has occurred and what will occur. The recourse does not appear to be exceptional. Another story from the same book, "The Intruder,"⁵⁹ indicates, from the same paratextual zone, from the aperture of those marginal texts where the story is inscribed, all the biblical, bibliographical references necessary for the quote but excessive for the epigraph: "2 Kings, 1:26,"⁶⁰ nothing more. Like in "The Gospel According to Mark," Borges specifies the references but abstains from quoting. These retrospective anticipations that simultaneously announce and suspend the reference imitate the archetypal nature of the aleph insofar as the present and past, present and absent model is both within each realization and beyond it. It was in this way that God proceeded, who—according to the *Midrash Rabbah*—in order to create the world had first to consult the Bible, previous and present, cause and effect of creation.

Interior and anterior, that transtextual ingression is its regress: the exit leads inside and back. As Derrida says, all writing is anterior; which is why with it begins history: "The worlds that propose *April March* are not regressive; what is regressive is the manner of writing their history," says Borges in "The Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain," clarifying that "the weak *calembour* of the title does not signify *The March of April* but rather, literally, *April March*."⁶¹

In "The Gospel According to Mark" the Gospel is interior and anterior. Because of this the crucifixion of Espinosa is *prescribed*: written, anterior, and obligatory. The transtextual mention does not distinguish whether the anteriority is only anticipation or cause. In *prescription*, the anteriority of writing is confused with causality. Its priority, because of its importance, its precedence, brings to light the opposition between the temporal and successive progression that defines the condition of the signifier, of the non-written sign according to Saussure, and writing as inversion—reversal and return—that is a form of salvation by literature. "Time recovered," reaching safety in writing, insinuates a glimpse of eternity, its splendence as much as its conjecture.

The invention of writing by Hermes-Mercury and the reconciliation of opposites by means of the cross is a recurrent idea in the texts of the alchemists, always ready to resolve conflict by means of paradoxes. Perhaps, as Jung says in *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, the unifying agent is the spirit of Mercury and, thus, its singular spirit makes the author confess to being a member of the Ecclesia Spiritualis, for the spirit of God. This religious antecedent appears in the selection of the term "Pelican" for the circular process, since the bird is a recognized allegory of Christ.⁶²

As occurs in Proust's novel, reading remits a thing to its beginning and what Paul understood as a mirror—as enigma and reversed—typology as annunciation, is not so different from what Origen understood for apocatastasis:⁶³ *restitutio et reintegratio* and the operations of allegorical reading; neither the one nor the other deny the "reversal and reinscription" that seems to be the foundation of deconstruction. The book is memory and divination and, speaking of interpretations, be it in Antioch or in Alexandria, repetition does not cease to be a transformation. In the same way that no book could communicate the ultimate knowledge, neither can its interpretation be definitive: "to want to limit the knowledge of the text would be as prudent as leaving a knife in the hands of a child."⁶⁴

The interpretation of the text reiterates, revises, in each reader the (theological) problem of comprehension, of a knowledge that may be as well explicated by *tautology* as by *paradox*. For Thomas Browne, ordinary events only require the credulity of common sense,⁶⁵ mystery is the

only possible proof of divinity: "I am what I am" enables the foundation of that mystery and the endeavors of a negative theology that, like *Docta Ignorantia*,⁶⁶ affirms by negating. The sacred definition affirms nondefinition, it runs through the discourse without interruption, turning around above itself. The end returns to the beginning, giving root to a paradox of knowledge capable of reconciling as much the reverse as repetition.

Analyzing the complexity of paradoxes, Rosalie L. Colie understands, on the basis of *The Sophist*, of *Theaetetus*, and of *Parmenides*, that the problems derived from the ineludibility of contradictions emerge from the proper nature of logos and the consecutive existence of two realms apparently opposed to one another, such that what is real in the one could not be so in the other: ". . . that paradox necessarily attends upon those men brave enough to travel to the limits of discourse."⁶⁷

In the same way as paradoxes, deconstructive operations question the mechanisms of comprehension and, above all, the certainties that comprehension establishes: "Certum est quia impossibile est."⁶⁸ But neither paradoxes nor deconstruction have an end. The paradox negates itself, and in negating itself the failure of definition constitutes a kind of definition. This contradiction holds as well for deconstruction, which deliberately avoids defining itself, plays with the temptation of deconstructing itself. As Oscar Wilde says, "paradoxes are very dangerous,"⁶⁹ hardly are they invoked when it becomes impossible to elude their occurring. The paradox negates definition, it negates itself, attempting, by that auto-deconstruction, to undermine the closure of disciplinary formulas, of academic norms, of the systems that are the most rigorous means of limitation—or the means of the most rigorous limitation.

"My end is my beginning,"⁷⁰ the phrase attributed by Borges to Schiller, is inscribed in the ring of the Queen of Scotland to confirm her Christian faith and challenge in this way execution and death. The necessity of a circular route, the return to the beginning, contradiction as a specular vision, the organization on the cross as a reconciliation of opposites, impossible literalness, the impossibility of paraphrasing paradox, the inscription in the ring could also be the enigma and motto of textual comprehension.

Perhaps the greatest fidelity verifies the greatest paradox.

3. PARADOXA ORTODOXA

1. Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1974), 259–262.
2. *Ibid.*, 1068–1073.
3. *Ibid.*, 259.
4. *Ibid.*
5. In the original: “(a)copiar,” a play on words between “to copy” and “to gather or store.” [W.E.]
6. *Ibid.*, 1068.
7. Jakobson, “Du réalisme en art,” in *Questions de Poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 34.
8. Borges, *Obras completas*, 491–495.
9. Borges, “Milonga del infiel,” *Los conjurados*, *Obras completas*, 90.
10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 25.
11. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Sur Maurice Blanchot* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1975), 47.
12. Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 26.
13. Derrida, “La pharmacie de Plato,” in *La dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 120.
14. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 58.
15. Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

16. Charles Baudelaire, "L'Héautontimorouménos," *Fleurs du mal, Œuvres complètes*, I (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 78.
17. *Ibid.*, 78.
18. Derrida, "La différance," *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 3.
19. Exodus 20.18, in *Young's Literal Translation*.
20. "Revelations," 1:12.
21. Paul, "Corinthians," I: 21, in *The Holy Bible*, King James version (Chicago: Good Counsel Publishers, 1965), 140.
22. Paoli, *Borges: Percorsi di significato* (Florence: Casa Editrice D'Anna, 1977), 95.
23. A popular magazine devoted to rural themes.
24. Borges, *Obras completas*, 1070.
25. Roland Barthes, "Proust et les noms," in *Les critiques de notre temps et Proust* présentation par Jacques Bersani (Paris: Garnier, 1971), 160.
26. The eponymous character of a dialogue of Plato that often carries the subtitle "On the Precision and Property of Names."
27. Barthes, "Proust et les noms," 160.
28. The action of calling, as much in the religious sense in which God calls, attracts to Himself a person, a people, as in that of the action and result of an installing voice; although similar, that *vocation* does not correspond completely with what linguistics considers performative utterances.
29. *Ibid.*, 163.
30. In this case we would have to understand *motivation* in two of its senses: (1) in general, as movement or that which puts into movement (from Latin: *motor*, *movere*: to move); (2) specifically, linguistically, as a principle opposed to the arbitrariness of the sign, a natural reason of being or the (onomatopoetic) possibility that the sign is imitating the thing.
31. Roger Dragonetti, *La vie de la lettre au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), 22.
32. *Propio*, which also means "own" [W.E.].
33. Lugones, *Obras poéticas completas* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1974), 197.
34. Hartman, *Saving the Text, Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 111.
35. Reading Dante, Luce Fabbri de Cressatti observed that some Italian nouns carry two meanings: one subjective and the other objective. "The distinction is found in the Latin grammars apropos of the specifying complements that carry out a subjective as well as an objective function, when the idea of an action or a sentiment is included in the respective noun. There are still today nouns that can have a specifying complement

- of both kinds. Typical example: 'The love of God' (*of God* is ambiguous. According to the context it could be 'the love of God for the world' or 'the love of the world for God')." From *Informe sobre sustantivos italianos susceptibles de dos significados, uno subjetivo y otro objetivo*, by Luce Fabbri de Casseti, whom I asked and now I thank.
36. Rodríguez Monegal, "Borges and Derrida: Boticarios," 123.
 37. Block de Behar, "A manera de prólogo," in *El texto según Genette, Maldoror* 20 (1985): 17–29.
 38. Scholem, *La kabbale et sa symbolique* (Paris: Payot, 1975), 40.
 39. What follows depends on words *clave* and *llave* in Spanish, both of which are translated by the English "key," the former denoting the musical key and connoting the more figurative meanings of "key," the latter the literal, physical object [W.E.].
 40. Jabès, *Ça suit son cours*, 58.
 41. Block de Behar, *Una retórica del silencio* (México: Siglo XXI Editores, 1984).
 42. *Lectarios*—The term I use for those characters who, in the text, appear as listeners of an out-loud reading realized by another character: neither proper listeners nor proper readers (the Gutres, little Marcel of the *Recherche*, little Jean of *Les mots*, and so on); they are included in a literary species whose complexity requires an attention that I will give it in another work.
 43. Borges, *Obras completas*, 1071.
 44. *Ibid.*, 1072.
 45. Hartman, *Saving the Text*, 109.
 46. Borges, "Del rigor de la ciencia," *Obras completas*, 847.
 47. Derrida, *La dissemination*, 182.
 48. Baltasar Gracián, *El criticón* (Barcelona: Fama, 1950), 375.
 49. Jakobson, *Essais de linguistique générale* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), 238–239.
 50. de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 77.
 51. Borges, *Obras completas*, 259.
 52. *Ibid.*, 718.
 53. 2 Corinthians, 3.6.
 54. I analyzed the detailed development of this thesis with reference to Woody Allen's film *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) where, in the same way as in "The Gospel According to Mark," the narrative action implies more than a narrative action and, between them, the characters move from one to another diegetic space. This ironic transit is verified, as in "The Gospel According to Mark," in a cinematographic narrative that has cinematic narrative as its theme, a transit enabled in turn by the conviction that legitimates credulity, seduction, literalness, a conviction shared by the

characters of these narratives in which "I am in heaven" is heard intoned at the beginning and the end, in heaven or in eternity. On the basis of T. S. Coleridge and beyond the quote from Borges transcribed in the epigraph, the transit is conceived and consolidated in a most Borgesian way.

55. Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 243–251: *diégésis* (equivalent to history). In normal usage diégésis constitutes the spatio-temporal universe referred to by the tale or in which the story plays itself out. Genette uses the term in the sense that E. Souriau gave it when he opposed diagetetic universe, as the place of the signified, to universe of the screen, as place of the filmic signifier. *Metalepsis*: a transgression that consists of the reference to the intrusion of a narrator or the extra-diegetic narratee into the diegetic universe (or of diegetic characters into an extra-diegetic universe). The effect produced is one of strangeness, humoristic or fantastic, and insinuates the impossibility of remaining outside of the narrative. (Definitions formulated on the basis of Genette's texts and assembled in *Maldoror* 20 (1985): 142–150.)

56. Julio Cortázar, "Axolotl", *Final de juego* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1964), 161–168.

57. Ever since the *Divine Comedy*, in Italian the name Galehaut (Galeotto), character of the Breton Cycle, has been used antonomastically to designate whichever character, object, or situation provokes an amorous relation: "Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse!" (Galeotto was the book and he who wrote it.) Dante, *Inferno*, v, 137.

58. Derrida, *Carte postale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980), 210.

59. Borges, *Obras completas*, 1025–1028.

60. *Ibid.*, 1025.

61. *Ibid.*, 462.

62. Jung, *Mysterium Conjunctionis*, 13.

63. *Dictionnaire de la foi chrétienne*, I, publié sous la direction de O. de La Brosse, A.-M. Henry and Ph. Rouillard (Paris: Les éditions du cerf, 1968), 52.

64. Hans von Campenhausen, *Les Pères Grecs* (Paris: Edition L'O-rante, 1963), 51.

65. Browne, *Religio Medici and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 9.

66. Nicolas of Cusa, *De la Docta Ignorantia* (Paris: La Maisnie, 1979).

67. Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 23.

68. Victor-José Herrero Llorente, *Diccionario de expresiones y frases latinas* (Madrid: Gredos, 1985), 77.

69. Wilde, *The Artist as Critic. Writings of Oscar Wilde*, edited by Richard Ellman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 307.
70. Personal conversation with Borges, Buenos Aires, 1983.