

CHAPTER I

Borges' Classical Revisions

That intellectual sphere, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

J. L. Borges, 'Pascal's Sphere' (1951: *SNF* 352)¹

In the summer of 1984, two years before his death in Geneva, Jorge Luis Borges went on his last tour around Southern Europe. The itinerary included Rome, Sicily, Athens and Crete.² In Sicily, he visited the ruins of Selinunte, the ancient Greek city that had been part of Magna Graecia from the sixth century BCE and had thrived on the south-west coast of the peninsula until its destruction by the Carthaginians around three centuries later.³ Photographers, journalists and fans followed Borges during this visit as he walked around the ancient acropolis with his common-law wife, María Kodama.⁴ He was nearly 85, almost blind, and by then regarded as one of the most extraordinary literary minds of the twentieth century. He had captivated generations of readers with a kaleidoscopic oeuvre whose subject matter spans over two thousand years of Western and Eastern literature, culture and thought, including those of ancient Greece and Rome. In recognition for his outstanding contribution to world literature, France granted him the *Ordre national de la Légion d'honneur* in 1983. He held honorary doctorates from the world's most prestigious universities, as well as numerous prizes in literature, including the Cervantes Prize (1980) and the Prix International (1961), which he shared with Samuel Beckett.⁵ His lectures on topics such as metaphor, blindness, the craft of poetry and translation mesmerized audiences both in Argentina and abroad. By 1984,

¹ For all citations of Borges' works, I give the date of publication in *SNF*, *CF* and *SP*. For the original place and date of publication of Borges' oeuvre, see the relevant entries in *OC* I–IV and *CE* I–II. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine alone or in collaboration with Andrew Laird.

² Borges and Ferrari (2014: 8–10). ³ Stefania de Vido in Bagnall et al. (2013) s.v. 'Selinous'.

⁴ Scianna (1999: 9–10).

⁵ On Borges' failure to win the Nobel Prize, see Williamson (2004: 397 and 425–26).

he had become a 'global classic' on a par with Marcel Proust, Frank Kafka and James Joyce. His profile as a blind author placed him within a Western tradition that dates back to Homer. Furthermore, he was deeply admired by a generation of writers such as Italo Calvino and Derek Walcott, (post)modern thinkers such as Gérard Genette, Michel Foucault and Harold Bloom, and filmmakers in Latin America and continental Europe.⁶ That day in Selinunte, therefore, was for many a rare, and possibly last, chance to see the celebrated author uniquely surrounded by the cultural heritage of the classical world, a world whose presence is ubiquitous, if indeed idiosyncratic, in his oeuvre.

Ferdinando Scianna, the Italian photographer chosen by Editorial Novecento to portray Borges' visit to Sicily, took magnificent photographs of the day. In the morning, Borges and Kodama visited the Regional Archaeological Museum in Palermo. Scianna's thematic focus was the blind author's sensory experience. After the loss of sight during the mid-1950s, the world at large had become for Borges a site to be reimaged. Several images show Borges' hand as it encounters classical objects and Kodama describes them to him (for an example see image on page 158). In the introduction to his album, Scianna describes Borges' excitement. Both the author's touch and María Kodama's voice become the means to experience the material culture exhibited before them:

At the museum she describes the statues and metopes to him, the light that bathes them, she guides his hand as it discovers the grooves of a sarcophagus, a bust of Caesar, the smooth perfection of the ephebe of Selinus or Hercules slaughtering a deer. Borges' faces lights up: 'Look, María, look!' His hands see what María's eyes see. Later he will walk around the magnificent acropolis of Selinunte, under the shining sun. (Scianna (1999: 10) (my translation))

Perhaps the best image that Scianna took on that acropolis is titled 'Borges at the ruins of Selinunte, Sicily 1984' (frontispiece). The image continues to explore Scianna's interest in Borges' experience of the cultural past through blindness. It shows the author wearing a suit, as was his lifetime habit, with silver-grey hair worn slightly long, disarrayed by a Mediterranean sea-wind. He stands facing the Temple of Hera at a distance.⁷ To his left and right there are vestiges of the ancient Greek city scattered about the natural

⁶ For a comprehensive study of the influence of Borges on (post)modern theory and the visual arts, see the essays in Aizenberg (ed.) (1990). This volume was published four years after Borges' death. For more recent discussions, especially on Borges' influence on (post)modern fiction, see Chapter 7 ('Successors of Borges' Classicism').

⁷ For a description of the archaeology of the Temple of Hera in Selinunte, identified as Temple E, see Neer (2012: 230–31). The structure one can see nowadays was re-erected from existing material between 1956–59.

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landscape. Above his head, a side of the temple can be seen in almost all its past glory: six Doric columns supporting a fragmentary metope. The focus on the author is well defined, whereas the temple before him is somewhat blurred: a contrast that seems to dramatize a simultaneous sense of distance and closeness in Borges' encounter with the classical past. Standing behind Borges, Scianna captures the back of his subject's head, neck and shoulders, as the author faces the ruin. What we, the viewers, don't see is Borges' face. Details of his facial expression and sensory experience have been left to our vast curiosity and imagination, and deliberately so. With this experimental shot, Scianna wants to convey the unique vision with which Borges plots our world and its cultural history.⁸ As we shall see throughout this book, full disclosures of the past, in this case the classical past, never interest Borges as a mode of interpreting its identity, status and tradition. Instead, what intrigues him are the stances that we adopt to experience – and, above all, the way we reimagine – that past as it reveals itself successively in space and time before us. Such is the intrinsic character of Borges' classicism.

Examples of this mode of encountering ancient Greece and Rome abound in Borges' writings, and amount to pioneering rereadings of the classical canon in twentieth-century world literature.⁹ Borges presents us with intriguing revisions of antiquity that point to experimental ways of recalling our cultural memory, replotting the temporal mechanisms with which Western literature and thought orders its cultural history and tradition, while also helping us to rethink the dialogue between antiquity and modernity. As in Scianna's photograph of Borges' encounter with the Temple of Hera, the interplay of distance and closeness to the classical object is crucial to the classical forms that we find in Borges' writings. As we shall soon see, Borges pictures the classics that we know so well in ways we have never imagined them before.

A Rumour of Homer

One way to begin thinking about this issue is to consider Borges' presentation of 'classics as a rumour'. Take, for instance, the manner in which the

⁸ Scianna understands well the significance of capturing Borges and the Temple of Hera in the way that he did. 'Borges always saw the whole world like this, through an alternative perspective, and with mind and intelligence. For me, this was a necessary shot [to capture this idea].' Warm thanks to Ferdinando Scianna for discussing this image – as well as his time and conversations with Borges during his visit to Palermo in 1984 – with me.

⁹ In this sense, my study of Borges' classicism is in close dialogue with the collection edited by Graziosi and Greenwood (2007) on the reception of Homer in the twentieth century. I discuss this dialogue in the closing section of Chapter 3 ('The Idea of Homer').

Argentine author envisages an afterlife for Homer in 'The Maker' (1960),¹⁰ as the ancient Greek poet forgets the memory of his own authorship and his canonicity dissipates in the course of time. This short story functions as a biographical riddle for the reader. The narrator relates the life experiences and recollections of a man whose name is never revealed. We only know from the title that he is a – or, more precisely, *the* – maker. The narrative carefully weaves allusions and clues that may be understood as classical (e.g. red-figure pottery; astronomy and myth; marble sculpture; wild boar as a staple food; the sea; women; and wine), but which first-time readers are meant to plot gradually as they follow the story to the end. From the outset, the man strikes us as oddly familiar: he could be a figure of cultural importance, even perhaps an ancient Greek, although we cannot yet ascertain his identity. In the opening paragraph, we learn about his character. For the maker, life experiences are not events to be recollected from memory, but ones that make up the very essence and spirit of his being:

He had never lingered amongst the pleasures of memory. Impressions, momentary and vivid would wash over him: a potter's vermilion glaze; the sky-vault filled with stars that were also gods; the moon, from which a lion had fallen; the smoothness of marble under his sensitive, slow fingertips; the taste of wild boar meat, which he liked to tear at with brusque, white bites; a Phoenician word; the black shadow cast by a spear on the yellow sand; the nearness of the sea or women; heavy wine, its harsh edge tempered by honey—these things could flood the entire circuit of his soul. ('The Maker' (1960: *CF* 292))

We next follow the maker's endless wanderings around the world, all of which begin to add a spatially global quality to his character and experience. Now overcome by blindness, and mysteriously older by what appear to be centuries, '[g]radually, the splendid universe began drawing away from him', and '[e]verything grew distant, and indistinct' (*CF* 292). The world of sensory experience, specifically that illuminated by vision, abandons him, and he perceives that all he has left are his recollections. Then he begins to descend into a labyrinth of forgotten childhood and manhood memories. These come to him 'the way one might feel upon recognizing a melody of a voice', but also as a kind of *déjà vu*: he senses 'that all this had happened to him before' (*CF* 292–93). Two memories, adventure and love, are the most acute, and finally lead him – and Borges'

¹⁰ Borges published most of his prose and verse first in separate form, either in newspaper literary sections or journals. The dates of publication given in this book correspond to those given in *OC* I–IV, *CEC* I–II and *SNF*, *CF* and *SP*.

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readers – to the revelation of whom he once was and what his destiny had been. It is at this last point in the narrative that Borges gives us concrete classical references that identify the man, the maker whom we had encountered in the title, with Homer, the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*:

With grave wonder, he understood. In this night of his mortal eyes in which he was descending love and adventure were also awaiting him. Ares and Aphrodite – because now he began to sense a rumour of glory and hexameters, a rumour of men who defend a temple that the gods will not save, a rumour of black ships that set sail from his beloved isle, the rumour of the *Odysseys* and *Iliads* that it was his fate to sing and to leave echoing in the cupped hands of human memory. (J. L. Borges, 'The Maker' (1960: *CF* 293))

The importance of 'The Maker' in Borges' construction of his own public and private authorship and autobiography will be discussed at length in Chapter 3, together with 'The Immortal' and a series of texts in which Borges explores the Homeric tradition. Here, I wish to draw attention to the manner in which Borges reimagines Homer for his readers. By appealing to a riddle that takes us from what seems strangely familiar to something we realize we already know, Borges invites us to recall the Greek poet and the texts that we attribute to him, while simultaneously creating a new memory of a Homeric postclassical life, or of a 'Homer after Homer'. On one level, 'The Maker' works as a supplementary narrative which, fictionally speaking, adds an unexplored biographical dimension to the post-Homeric life. On another level, it invites us to rediscover Homer and his poetry by bringing back their memory in the shape of a rumour that comes from his classical past. Arguably, the innovative aspect of this story is not the past memory it ultimately recollects – after all, we don't need Borges' story to remember that Homer is the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. What shows great innovation is the experimental narrative through which the story takes us to recall the Homeric life and afterlife: 'The Maker' first stages a cognitive distance between us and the Greek poet by imagining a facet of his post-Homeric life that we, naturally, don't know and have to plot, then narrows that gap by appeal to a whisper that reminds us of the Homeric past we know well.

The motif of classics as a whispering memory that puts antiquity and modernity into an experimental dialogue forms a significant part of Borges' approach to reading the classics. As we shall see in more theoretical detail below and throughout this book, this unique perspective of reading has the effect of destabilizing the 'normal' directionality with which the Western tradition tends to plot classical memory in historical time and cultural space.

Pierre Menard's *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*

The classical canon partakes of an equally intriguing journey in Borges' 'Pierre Menard: Author of the Quixote', published in *Fictions* in 1944. While in 'The Maker' Borges explores the interplay of temporal and spatial distance and closeness to recall the memory of Homer, 'Pierre Menard' opens new routes to rereading the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, and the classics more generally, by disrupting the logic of original and imitation that dominates Western literary history. This fiction relates the story of Pierre Menard, an early twentieth-century author who sets himself the task of rewriting Cervantes' novel verbatim, while claiming that his version of the Quixote is as original as Cervantes'. The two texts, or at least the lines that Menard technically reproduces from Part I, Chapter IX of Cervantes' *Quixote*, are identical but their meanings turn out to be markedly different.¹¹ As Menard explains:

I have assumed the mysterious obligation to reconstruct, word by word, the novel that for him (Cervantes) was spontaneous . . . Composing the Quixote in the early seventeenth century was a reasonable, necessary, perhaps even inevitable undertaking; in the early twentieth, it is virtually impossible. Not for nothing have three hundred years elapsed, freighted with the most complex events. Amongst those events, to mention but one, is the *Quixote* itself. (J. L. Borges, 'Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote' (1944: CF 92–3))

Borges' 'Menard' articulates a paradox: two exact same texts of the *Quixote* turn out to mean different things when produced and read in different centuries.¹² This notion may appear to recall the premises of (new) historicism, which, despite its many revisions, continues to stress the importance of interpreting texts according to the contexts in which they are produced. Yet Borges is not a standard-issue historicist (old or new). By its central paradox, 'Menard' undermines any view of the primacy of original meaning: the same words mean differently, and that is not just a question of how one contextualizes them (in fact, could a corollary be that 'different' might mean 'the same'?). It is important to remember that, above all, Menard's project is a project of translation, which gets one inevitably into a dialect of sameness and difference, and the paradoxes engendered thereby.¹³ The paradox could also be seen to foreshadow what would become one of the most enduring

¹¹ The Borgesian narrator cites the line: ' . . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor'.

¹² See Sarlo (1993: 31–3) for the implications of this paradox in Borgesian poetics.

¹³ I am grateful to Charles Martindale for discussing the complexity at the heart of Borges' paradox with me.

theories of reception to date, where the meaning of a text is realized at the moment of its reception.¹⁴ However, Borges' concern is not exactly who or what guarantees the meaning of the text. His interest is in the question of the status and identity that texts acquire in the course of cultural history, a history that tends to operate chronologically and categorize texts in the canon in terms of original and adaptation. For Borges, Menard's *Quixote* can claim to be as original as Cervantes'. Or, put differently, Cervantes' *Quixote* can equally be understood as a version of the *Quixote de La Mancha* just as Menard's is. This is because, Borges argues, neither of these texts are definitive stories of the fictional *Quixote*. It does not matter who wrote it first. Each of the stories is a rendition of a fictional idea that already exists, as all knowledge exists and can be discovered, rather than originally invented and subsequently copied, by us. Hence, we have the story of a knight called *Quixote* who comes from La Mancha, a story that can be told differently, even when the same words are used, in the seventeenth, twentieth or any century in between and after. 'Fate enjoys repetitions, variations, symmetries', Borges argues in 'The Plot' (1981), a short fiction that explores the cyclical repetition of Caesar's assassination in the murder of a gaucho from the Argentine Pampas (discussed in Chapter 2). Despite the fact that we know that Cervantes' version appears before Menard's, we can still read both of them as variations of an ongoing theme that exists, regardless of who relates it first or last. This premise can equally be applied, as the Borgesian narrator concludes in 'Menard', to our reading of classical themes, such as *Odysseus*' and *Aeneas*' travels in Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, the latter of which is typically plotted as a reworking of the former. Thus, the story concludes:

Menard has (perhaps unwittingly) enriched the slow and rudimentary art of reading by means of a new technique—the technique, requiring infinite patience and concentration, encourages us to read the *Odyssey* as though it came after the *Aeneid* . . . This technique fills the calmest books with adventure. Attributing the *Imitatio Christi* to Louis Ferdinand Céline or James Joyce—is that not sufficient renovation of those faint spiritual admonitions? (J. L. Borges, 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*' (1944: CF 95))

Menard's remarkable reading technique throws into disarray the pervasive structure and temporal order that organize our interpretation of canonical texts, like the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, into original and copy by introducing

¹⁴ For a seminal study of this notion in classical literature that has influenced subsequent, worldwide discussion, see Martindale (1993).

the liberating idea of the *version* as an alternative exegetical paradigm. This paradigm becomes a guiding force in Borges' encounters with the Graeco-Roman past, and presents us with groundbreaking re-readings of Homer, the Greek lyric poets, the historic and fictional Caesar, and Virgil, amongst other authors and themes from the classical canon discussed in the present book.

Zeno after Kafka

The disarticulation of traditional forms of plotting the classics and their transmission takes on a further reconfiguration in Borges' 'Kafka and his Precursors'. This fictional essay, one of Borges' outstanding discussions of the mechanisms of literary influence, focuses on a series of texts that the Argentine author sees as informing the narrative structure of Kafka's last, unfinished novel *The Castle* (1926). The first text that Borges identifies is Zeno's paradox against motion, retold by Aristotle in *Physics* 6.9.239b, and appealing to the figures of the arrow and Achilles as illustrations:

At one time I considered writing a study of Kafka's precursors. I had thought at first that he was as unique as the phoenix of rhetorical praise; after spending a little time with him, I felt I could recognize his voice, or his habits, in the texts of various literatures and various ages. I will note a few of them here, in chronological order. The first is Zeno's paradox against motion. A moving body at point A (Aristotle states) will not be able to reach point B, because it must first cover half of the distance between the two, and before that, half of the half, and before that, half of the half of the half, and so on to infinity; the form of this famous problem is precisely that of the *The Castle*, and the moving body and the arrow and Achilles are the first Kafkaesque characters in literature. (J. L. Borges, 'Kafka and his Precursors' (1951: *CF* 363))

Studies in Borgesian poetics and theory generally read this fictional essay as a text that anticipates the perennial question of the ontology of the author and reader vis-à-vis the text that has preoccupied thinkers before and since Barthes.¹⁵ What has received little or no attention is the unique manner in which Borges reimagines a classical theme in this fiction. In 'Kafka', we unexpectedly find Zeno of Elea's familiar reference to the flying arrow and Achilles racing against the tortoise in a light we have never seen them in before. With Borges, they cease to be mere examples of Greek analytical philosophy to become no less than 'the first Kafkaesque characters in

¹⁵ Wood (2013: 36–7).

literature'. This, Borges maintains, is what makes them the very precursors of Kafka. Yet this innovative recasting of Zeno's illustrations into dramatic, influential figures of early twentieth-century world literature is not without a further sense of paradox:

If I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous pieces I have listed resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other. This last fact is most significant. Kafka's idiosyncrasy is present in each of these writings, to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had not written, we would not have perceived it; that is to say, it would not exist . . . The word 'precursor' is indispensable to the vocabulary of criticism, but one must not try to purify it from connotation of polemic or rivalry. The fact is that each writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future. (J. L. Borges, 'Kafka and his Precursors' (1951: *CF* 365))

Here, Borges calls for a redefinition of the word 'precursor', which, he argues, is a critical tool for plotting a competitive relation between source and target texts. Yet his search for a redefinition of this critical idiom is even more far-reaching. We have seen that Borges presents Achilles and the ancient Greek arrow as the precursors of the narrative structure of Kafka's *The Castle*. Paradoxically, however, these classical figures become precursors of Kafka only after *The Castle* implicitly points to their literary influence on its narrative structure. As 'the first Kafkaesque characters in literature', they can therefore be plotted as such only *after* we read Kafka. Zeno's familiar examples then become bizarre successors of a twentieth-century novel by virtue of a later writer's ability to modify, as Borges concludes, 'our conception of the past, as it will modify the future'. As with the question of literary succession in Borges' 'Menard', the notion of literary influence we find in 'Kafka' further disrupts long-established orders of plotting the classical past. In Borges, this crucial reconfiguration is intimately connected to the author's conception of time and its volatile flux in literary history, a theme that receives special attention in this book.

Classical Memory and Forgetfulness

The interplay of memory and forgetfulness is intrinsic to Borges' plotting of the classics and their tradition. This feature is particularly apparent in Borges' innovative approach to reading 'classical absences' (discussed in the next section), by which Borges principally means the Greek and Roman classics that we have forgotten once existed, either because they are lost to us, or because they have been 'eclipsed' from our memory as a result of the cultural impact of other

surviving canonical texts. Borges elaborates on the makings of his own literary memory in a dialogue with Osvaldo Ferrari in 1984:

My memory is rather a memory of quotations from pages of poetry I have read . . . these quotations are from texts that imposed themselves on my memory; they have moved me to such a point that they have become unforgettable . . . Now, I think that memory requires forgetting. The justification of this thought can be found in my story 'Funes the Memorious'. ('On Memory', *Conversations I* (2014) 265–66 (trans. J. Wilson))

'Memory requires forgetting': indeed, 'Funes the Memorious' is arguably one of the most thought-provoking representations of this notion in twentieth-century fiction. In this story, we encounter the prodigious yet monstrous memory of Ireneo Funes, a barely educated Uruguayan with a bizarre passion for both the Latin language and Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis*. After two meetings with Funes, the Borgesian narrator (presented in this story as an erudite reader of Latin and connoisseur of the classics) describes Funes' unprecedented condition:

[Funes] is virtually incapable of general, platonic ideas. Not only is it difficult for him to see that the generic symbol 'dog' took all the dissimilar individuals of all shapes and sizes . . . [his] own face in the mirror, his own hands surprised him every time he saw them . . . He saw – he *noticed* – the progress of death, of humidity. He was a solitary, lucid spectator of a multiform, momentaneous, and almost unbearably precise world . . . To think is to ignore (or forget) differences, to generalize, to abstract. In the teeming world of Ireneo Funes there was nothing but particulars – and they were virtually *immediate* particulars. (J. L. Borges, 'Funes and his Memory' (1944: *CF* 136–7))

'Funes the Memorious' is a rich text that has been analysed in multiple ways by scholars of different disciplines, from the Arts and Humanities to the Neurosciences.¹⁶ Yet little has been said about Funes as a reader, or plotter, of reality. As the Borgesian narrator describes him, Funes is not a close reader of the empirical world, since he cannot identify particulars and use those identifications to generate abstract thought. This is because he recalls every single thing that he sees, feels, hears or touches anew, to the point that his mind becomes a collector of unprocessed data (as Funes explains to his interlocutor, 'My mind is like a garbage heap', *CF*, 135). Funes therefore cannot grasp the concept of 'a dog', as Borges points out. Instead, he remembers every single instance that he has seen, without being able to process these instances into the abstract figure or notion that we identify as

¹⁶ See Bär (2010: www.lanacion.com.ar/1229225-borges-se-antipo-medio-siglo-a-las-neurociencias).