9. What Is Quotation and Why Do We Do It?
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Our speech, that is, all our utterances [are] filled with others’ words
(M. M. Bakhtin)

The wisdom of the wise, and the experience of ages, may be preserved by quotation
(Benjamin Disraeli)

Our glances at quoting in other times and places throw a sharper light on the contemporary quoting patterns with which we started. Though they are by no means uniform across all participants and situations, some of the specificities of that ‘here and now’ of quoting in twenty-first century England are now clearer. The dominant educational practices; presumption of widespread literacy; particular mix of media; literary genres; the tensions surrounding notions of plagiarism; the uses and prohibitions of quoting and their fluid dynamic amidst changing technologies and ethics; even the linguistic forms through which we speak and write – all these between them present one specific case within the long human experience of quoting and quotation.

And it is also clear that these contemporary participants in the practices of quoting and in the debates that surround them are far from alone. The intervening chapters since those opening examples reveal a plentitude of cases stretching back through the centuries: the forms and meanings of quotation marks; the roots of quotation collections and their at-times remarkable continuities; quoting in art and music; unease about the definition of quotation or the status of unwritten forms; others’ words and voices in literary, religious and rhetorical settings; issues over authorship, plagiarism and control. The background to our quoting is long and vast, practices and debates that still cast their influence over how we quote – a variegated and continuing human history that still shapes the engagement with others’ words and voices today.
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But we are still left with a puzzle, one that the mass observers, like others, were reflectively concerned with. Just what is it to draw in, and on, the words and voices of others? And why, eventually, do we quote?

9.1. So what is it?

The question remains a knotty one. For if the explorations in this book have shown anything it is that quotation is not a single thing. The initial impression of clear-cut demarcation based on contrasts such as those between direct and indirect speech or the presence or absence of ‘quote marks’ soon dissolves, for the nature and boundaries of quoting turn out elusive and complex. ‘No one has successfully solved what is and is not a quotation’ admitted the committee preparing the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*’ second edition fifty years ago: a question, the most recent editor adds, ‘which may still be debated today’ (ODQ7 2009: xvi). This chimes well with the uncertainties of some British mass observers over where quotation starts and ends. Does repeating snatchs from others’ conversations count and ‘catchwords’ from television programmes? Or is it only ‘proper’ quotations from the Bible or Shakespeare? Where are the boundaries of ‘plagiarism’? And how far or in what sense are ‘quotations’ distinct from ‘normal’ language?

Such queries are indeed to the point. In some instances ‘quotation’ may indeed be clearly demarcated – but not always. And even when it is, there is little overall consensus even in one period let alone across the world or the ages as to just where the boundaries ultimately lie. The many terms noted in Chapter 7 which at one time or another have been used as synonymous or contiguous with ‘quotation’ and ‘quoting’ give some idea of its potential spread (see Fig. 7.3). The notions around quotation flow into many different directions, emphases and viewpoints – and that is only the terms in one language.

Thus what counts as quotation may in one setting be confined to authorised-as-sacred passages, in others to words from revered human ancestors. In others again it can be idiosyncratic family sayings, quips from television comedians or just tinges in everyday speaking. Others’ words and voices may be more, or less, explicitly signalled and differentiated, and some kinds of repetitions approved, others not – or not in particular contexts or from particular speakers. Genres may or may not be expected to make play with the obtrusive display of particular intersections of voices, quotation marks in diverse forms turned to variegated purposes,
and repetitive formulaic expressions sometimes not only permitted but flaunted, while both now and over the centuries translation and parody have provoked conflicting assessments. Debates over quoting mesh with differing understandings of what is meant in using others’ words and with contending positions about who should be in control. Just as what counts as reprehensible plagiarism, what as laudable imitation or originality, what as the mark of creative genius changes over the centuries, so too the objectivising of quoted words is hardly assessed in the same way by all parties even on one occasion let alone across differing settings. Within the flow of words there can be layers of allusion or of irony, more, or less, recognised by participants, just as there can be varying relations between what used to be called ‘direct’ versus ‘indirect’ speech. And added into all this are the diversities of linguistic usage – the particular ways in which others’ words and voices can be indicated – together with the changing media and technologies which hold and transmit them whether at any one time or across the centuries.

Attempts to forge one single definition of just what quoting and quotation essentially are founder on these diversities. So too do proposals to set up universally applicable lines between what is ‘quotation’, what surrounding text or dominant voice. Certainly for specific cultural traditions, individual genres or particular situations it makes sense to trace how others’ words and voices are drawn and recognised: here indeed we rightly rely on detailed ethnographies of specific practices. But we cannot easily generalise from such accounts. And even within the relatively agreed conventions of one particular time and place the practice of quoting seems to elude our forays to capture it.

In short there is no uniform way that quoting and quotation are demarcated, practised and conceptualised. It is true that the other theme to emerge from these chapters is that the use of others’ words and voices is unmistakeably a highly significant – and sensitive – dimension of human communication. Perhaps it is for that very reason that quoting in the end turns out so elusive and that to offer some bounded answer to the question ‘what is quotation?’ at last proves impossible.

In this impasse, one riposte might be to conclude, as indeed some have, that everything is quotation. From this perspective quoting is not a clearly separated activity but a constant thread in our processes of communication more generally. All the words and phrases we use and hear were after all at some point learned from others; so too are
our repetitions and manipulations of them. We are brought back to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s rightly famous assertion in his ‘Quotation and originality’,

Our debt to tradition through reading and conversation is so massive, our protest or private addition so rare and insignificant, – and this commonly on the ground of other reading or hearing, – that, in a large sense, one would say there is no pure originality. All minds quote. Old and new make the warp and woof of every moment. There is no thread that is not a twist of these two strands. By necessity, by proclivity, and by delight, we all quote (Emerson 1876: 158).

Or again we can make play with the concept of pervasive intertextuality or recall Bakhtin’s ringing ‘Our speech, that is, all our utterances [are] filled with others’ words’ (1986: 89).

There is much to be said for this position. There is indeed no creation from nothing, or words and voices that start from nowhere. But it is only part of the truth, and we do well not to follow such formulations too literally or comprehensively (nor indeed did Emerson or Bakhtin). Certainly they sensibly jolt us out of narrow-minded perspectives on language and literature and turn our attention to the multiply-layered quality of human interaction. They also remind us yet again that the boundaries of ‘quoting’ are nothing set in granite. But conflating all human communication with quoting is too simple, if only because it extends the target so widely that its wonderfully variegated texture disappears. Collapsing quoting into linguistic expression generally leaves unaddressed our awareness – faint and elusive as it often is – that not all words or voices are the same: that we do indeed, to one degree or another and in interestingly variable ways and amidst numerous twists and turns, actively manipulate the words and voices of others.

It seems more realistic to accept that what we have is not some single phenomenon but a broad family of practices through which people do indeed engage in re-sounding the words and voices of others – and themselves find this of interest and importance and deploy it in a range of different ways. This multifaceted constellation of human ways with others’ words and voices is tapped into and conceptualised in variegated forms across diverse cultures and historical periods. Ideas and practices shift around within this broad family without their being any one inevitable patterning, moulded as they are not only by current conditions but by legacies from the past, both overt and hidden. How using others’ words and voices is practised, defined, admired, exploited,
manipulated and controlled is not the same in differing periods, situations, groupings, even in individual outlooks and usages. In some contexts unnoticed, in others highly exposed and sensitive, there are many paths along which voices and words are authorised, or banned, or selectively displayed, open to some users but not others, or battled over by contending claimants.

But what remains striking – to repeat – is the continuing human practice of somehow calling in and on others’ words and voices. This is far from just a pursuit, as some have supposed, of intellectuals or acclaimed cultural elites. The contemporary British commentators, users of proverbs through the ages, speech-makers in remote villages, makers of commonplace books, mediaeval consulters of scriptural collections, reporters of people’s conversations, enactors of rituals and literary arts, regulators of others’ words – all have in one way or another exploited the processes of quoting. The absence of a culturally-neutral delimitation does not make our uses of others’ words and voices any the less interesting. There may not be some universal entity called ‘quotatation’, but there is indeed a spectrum of overlapping notions and practices. This rainbow of actions and ideologies emerges as a long-enduring set of practices that humans in some ways take for granted without really noticing, in others work at, delight in or struggle to control: a deeply-rooted potentiality of human life.

9.2. The far and near of quoting

Can we say anything further about this rainbow and how humans make play with it? Given its variegated manifestations it should by now be no surprise that quoting can be put to multiple uses, deployed for just about any purpose under the sun. Here too is near-unending diversity. Just as talk can be turned to an infinity of functions and settings, so too can the marshalling of others’ words and voices.

Let me recapitulate just a few.

Quoting can be used for originality or routine; for challenging authority or for lauding it; to control or to rebel; for excluding or including; for passive memorising or for brilliant extemporisation and creatively applied insight. As speech act, quoting can accomplish a multitude of things, from asserting or subverting or manipulating tradition to uplifting in sermon or imposing rigours on the young. Others’ words and voices can be called on to convey
irony or humour, to situate writer, speaker and character in narrative, to carry the voice of the divine, to bond within a group or to distance from it. Quotation collections can be exploited as mines or as symbols, prized by some, resented or ignored by others. Short quotes like proverbs or verses from sacred writings can resonate in the memory, interrupt an otherwise smooth text, stir up activism, exert pressure, settle disputes, or persuade others. In Erasmus’ image

It happens (how, I cannot tell) that an idea launched like a javelin in proverbial form strikes with sharper point on the hearer’s mind and leaves implanted barbs for meditation

(Erasmus Adages (Introduction vii), CWE Vol. 31: 17).

The insertion of others’ words and voices can be an aid to understanding, a glancing allusion to a cluster of associations, a means to capture or entrance through some memorable phrase, analogy or anecdote. Or it can be for self-mockery, parody, satire. A passage can be set up as object for commentary or debate, a voice enact the persona and wisdom of others beyond our current sphere. Typified words and voices can be sounded – not what someone actually said but a subtle note of comment or universality through some notional attribution.

Beautiful or engaging words called into service from elsewhere serve to decorate texts. The earlier chapters have given a glimpse – only too brief – of the amazing artistries of others’ words, whether direct or indirect, overt or near-submerged in the consciousness. As Erasmus, again, has it

to interweave adages deftly and appropriately is to make the language as a whole glitter with sparkles from Antiquity, please us with the colours of the art of rhetoric, gleam with jewel-like words of wisdom, and charm us with titbits of wit and humour

(Erasmus Adages (Introduction viii), CWE Vol. 31: 17-18).

Yet in other cases such interweaving is perceived as rendering texts turgid and second-hand – at least to some readers – or, equally disapproved, a token of the show-off pedantry so decried by the British commentators. Recognising words as coming from elsewhere can endow them with special authority and beauty or, equally, be a means to rejecting or disclaiming them, or of seemingly avoiding personal responsibility even as we bring them forward for notice. It can be used to avoid taking the credit – but at the same time perhaps gain it indirectly through association with some tradition or figure beyond oneself.
Quoting can put something on stage, elevated as an object for the expression of some attitude to it. The ‘look at me’ stance in aesthetically marked genres is itself a kind of quotation, or at any rate akin to it. This displaying is turned to many purposes: recognised as art, as the object of exegesis or contemplation, as something to be ridiculed or attacked. It draws attention to itself as something needing ‘reading in slow motion’ and with ‘multiple meanings’ as Marjorie Garber well puts it in her Quotation Marks (2003: 4, 5). Taking on others’ words and voices can be for indirection too. Veiled and metaphorical quotations convey others’ messages and formulations in an evocative rather than explicit way, or make a point without seeming too personal about it. They can carry layers of meaning for some but not all participants, as with the African National Congress leaders’ expression of resistance through Shakespeare quotations rather than direct – and dangerous – words claimed as their own (Hofmeyr 2006: 259). The literary device of allusiveness can link in subtle indirect ways to other people, places, times, ideas – even to other dimensions of oneself.

These variegated modes of using others’ words and voices intersect and overlap. Multiple purposes and effects can go along together, or work out differently not only in differing times and places but for differing participants in the same moment. Within this bundle of usages there are near-infinite purposes to which the human activities of quoting can be turned.

We need to take good heed of that unbounded diversity. But I want to go on from that to focus on one quality of our engagement with others’ words and voices that has for me emerged strongly in this investigation. This is what I have alluded to as the far and near of quoting, its paradoxical duality. In quoting in its widest sense – the interweaving of others’ words and voices in our own – we do indeed evoke the past and the far removed, hear the words and voices of others, set texts at a distance, look from outside ourselves. But also, by that very act, we brand the past with the present, capture others’ voices into our own, draw the distant to ourselves. In quoting we simultaneously enact past and present, enstage both ourselves and others.

All linguistic action is in a sense rooted in what has gone before. But quoting is pre-eminently so. It deploys words and voices from the past. Even a report of the most recent of conversations rehearses a prior event, while other wordings go back in actuality or perception for years or centuries. Learning the ‘great sayings of the past’ is a recurrent element in the education of the young, and the processes of cultural transmission from one generation to another have not seldom included an obligation to conserve and pass on the words of those
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before them. Quotations connect to the personages of the past, not just within our families and intimates, but to iconic individuals and symbols of history. Using their words is to associate yourself with an evocative figure of the past.

The words and voices are from the past. But to quote is not only to see them as before and beyond, but to bring them to the present and take them to yourself. It is to insert yourself into the unfolding of history – or of eternity – and lay claim to a part in it.

Some for renown, on scraps of learning dote,
And think they grow immortal as they quote

quipped Edward Young (1728, Satire I) – satirically no doubt, but he had a point. Quoting is at once to capture voices from the past into the here and now, and extend the present into the past – not immortality exactly, but a stride over the gap of chronology, a touch of continuity outside time. It can be intimately personal, as for the British observers who quoted grandparents as a way of keeping them alive in memory, but it can go beyond that too. It resonates through quoting from sacred texts, from great literary models or from the words of some inspiring prototype. Kellett spoke of quotation allowing hearers to ‘recognise the old in the new’ (Kellett 1933: 3), while A. L. Becker’s describes how

These small texts – proverbs, semiproverbs, and clichés – are a form of speaking the past. But uttering them – even with all the controls over rhythm, pitch, and voice quality that music provides – is also to some extent speaking the present


A comment nearer home aptly notes how ‘quotations immortalise ideas, insights and inspiration. Finding and using a quote enables us to further those ideas and insights by giving them a contemporary context’ (OUP survey 2006). In quoting more than in any form of communicative interaction we forge a merger – of past transformed to present, present invested with the past.

The conjunction of far and near also comes out in the distancing dimension inherent in quotation. We call on text or voice outside the self, beyond the ephemeral interests of the passing moment. Here is an external voice to which the speaker or reader of the moment conjoins their own, endowing it with the aura and tone of the other. They put another perspective on some situation – the voice of revered authority, of some universal human dilemma, of the truth in proverb, of some recollected voice – and in doing so venture to bring that outside vision to themselves. Quoting can give
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speaker and listener a stance outside the quoted words, looking in from the outside. Here, some would say, is that key act of objectifying that enabled the scientific revolution or, for others, the great commentaries on literary and religious texts or the enduring human power to see themselves from the outside. Here too lie the possibilities of parody, of mockery, of critique, contemplation, challenge. Chunks of words can be isolated – more, or less – away from the flow of action, set up for reflection or play, detached from the speaking or writing self.

Yet that ligature too remains dual. The distancing in turn draws the quoted voice and text near, seizing and judging it: standing back not just to externalise but to claim the right to hold an attitude to it, whether of approval, caution, admiration, disavowal, analysis, interpretation, irony, reference... The words may indeed be torn from their earlier setting and stand as if independent and timeless. But quoting is to re-enact them in another present. Something new is created, a fresh modulation and presence that is at the same time loaded with that older voice.

Here is the key dynamic and tension within the disparate yet recurrent threads of quotation. Quoting in its infinity of manifestations is at once ‘there and away’ and ‘here and now’. It is both to distinguish the words and voices of others and to make them our own, both distancing and claiming.

This is the background too to the conjunction between ‘text’ and ‘voice’. Coming from different wings of linguistic-literary analysis one or the other concept has often been to the fore. They capture different elements, true, but can equally be seen as complementary dimensions of human expression. In the context of quoting they work inextricably together, mutually interdependent sides of the same coin. For quoting is not just regurgitating chunks of text or keeping them on library shelves but taking them to your own voice and in that act declaring a perspective on them. In quoting, words and voice by necessity interfuse. Text takes on the voice(s) of its users as they reframe it in the recontextualised moment, whether as speakers, readers, creators, transmitters, audiences. The quoted – transformed – words cannot avoid their enactor’s voice: of approval, irony, awe, satire, affection, even the hands-off stance of ‘no comment’ which itself voices a position. Quoting above all melds voice and word. It is more than a physical sounding, vocalised or other – though that is one aspect – more than just ‘a voice’, more than a text of words on page. Its dual nature means at once matter gleaned from another’s harvest in the actual or perceived past beyond yourself, and its present garnering to your own.
Here then is the enchanted transformation of quoting – at once now and past, here and distant, self and other, near and far, the same and not the same. In quoting we sound not just our own voices but those that went before, sometimes far distant, sometimes nearby but still with that stance of looking in on us from outside and in turn being regarded and answered back. Whether or not we are fully aware of it – for it may be only the gentlest of echoes – quoting calls the external and distant into the immediate moment. Through quoting we sing a co-created polyphony of words and voices that are ours and not ours, past and not-past, mingling while standing back, both presence and beyond presence.

9.3. Why quote?

Amidst the many things to be said about quoting we have still reached no single answer as to why we do it.

With this infinity of reasons for using others’ words and voices perhaps in the end it makes little sense to seek some general explanation. It is surely unrealistic to stay with that thin model of language which sees it as at root referential and cognitive, with quoting, together with poetic or allusive diction, separated off as some special ‘non-standard’ modification that needs justification. Rather, I would argue, quoting with its multiple ramifications should be seen not as some separate add-on thing for which we want a special explanation, but as something as normal as any other facet of language. Our forms of expression are to be understood as a fabric that we weave together, shot through with many glints; less a series of single notes than of multistranded chords in many registers, a chorus of past and present. And here again voice and text come together, where we take the words of others to ourselves, and our own words sound with the voices of those who formed and heard and implicitly commented on those words both now and in the past.

So ultimately what finally emerges from this investigation is what I might term the quotingness, both overt and hidden, of human expression. The interplay of overlapping voices and viewpoints that we work with – more, or less, differentiated, more, or less, explicit, more, or less, brightly coloured – is a perpetual rather than secondary dimension of human living.

Why then do we quote? Sometimes, as we saw in Chapter 8, there are indeed reasons against it. Like other human actions it is constrained as well as facilitated in its particular social and historical settings. But in
the end – why not? There is no need to seek further for some generalised justification. For engaging with the multiple potentials of quoting is how we live our lives, how we variously connect with others and with ourselves, with our past and our present.