

Sara Strong

Samuel Cohen

English 4995

13 May 2011

Making Pierre Menard Author of the Quixote:

Critics, Creators, and Context in Borges

Though it has not always been so, it is now possible to conceptualize the act of reading as a process in which we necessarily form an interpretation of a piece of literature, and in so doing, create the *work*, or the meaning of a piece of literature—meaning which is intrinsically tied to both the linguistic event of the work, or its *text*, and the context out of which our reading has come. For this model, critical theory is greatly indebted to the work of Jorge Luis Borges. The title character of Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," a minor French Symbolist whose "visible works" can be "easily enumerated," undertakes a project which fundamentally questions the relation not only of a literary work to its text, but—perhaps more importantly—investigates the processes through which a work comes to be and who may lay claim to it. Though in the end, Menard's project is unfinished, invisible, and, we are informed, impossible, it is nonetheless, from an intellectual point of view, an ambitious scandal: attempting to write the *Quixote*, a text which has already been written and has, as a context, itself. Menard does not seek to rewrite or duplicate the *Quixote*, nor to translate it, but to actually produce the *Quixote*, linguistically identical to Cervantes's

seventeenth century Spanish novel but written from the experience of Pierre Menard and attributed to him.

The great critical debate over Borges's proposals regarding the relation of literary works to their texts and the success or failure of Pierre Menard's project wages on, and though this issue certainly bears on my analysis of the story, I find myself agreeing with Jesús Aguilar's admonition that to "assume that Borges was defending all the time the view that a work cannot be its text" is to "deliberately [read] into a piece of fiction a highly contentious ontological thesis" (174). I am interested less in debating whether or not it is possible for a text to exist independently of the work associated with it and more in how a text is transformed into a work, what motivates that transformation, who claims the work produced—or claims authority on it—and what the consequences of the act of creating and the act of laying claim are. Through Pierre Menard's project and the narrator's commentary on it, Borges parodies the author's longing for the glorified status of creator as well as the impulse of authors and critics alike to seek legitimization within their cultural contexts. Simultaneously, Borges suggests that historical periods should be understood not only in terms of the literary texts which are produced during them, but in terms of what readers and critics of the period rely on to create a text's meaning, and to what use they put the text in question. Developing this understanding is not merely a matter of interpretation and context, but of the status attributed to a text within a given community—and the effects of that status.

Origins: The Question of Authorship

Much like Dante Alighieri, who insistently draws attention to his status as a poet throughout the *Commedia* but most especially in Canto VI of *Inferno*, when the virtuous pagan poets (or Poets) of Hell's first circle greet him as kin (ln. 82-102), and whose text is marked by mimesis of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Borges is preoccupied with the role of the author in "Pierre Menard," and his relationship to his predecessors. I say "the author," not "himself as author," in order to address the multifarious nature of authorship and construed authority in the piece: we have Miguel Cervantes, seventeenth century Spanish author of the *Quixote*; Pierre Menard, the twentieth century symbolist from Nîmes and would-be author of the *Quixote*; Madame Henri Bachelier and others who have written about Pierre Menard; the narrator of the story, a contemporary of Menard's who privileges himself above the late author's other critics; and finally, Borges himself, the mastermind behind this short story masquerading as criticism. These voices intermingle and overlap even as they support and/or oppose one another's claims to authoritative status.

Given the complexity of this structure—and of the theoretical framework of "Pierre Menard"—it will prove instructive to explore some of Borges's thoughts on literary creation. In "Pierre Menard" and other writings, both fictional and nonfictional, Borges subverts the sacred idea of the individual author as the origin of literature. One of the ideas that Borges revisits in a number of writings is the concept of literary creation as an act of many minds united in one mind, or one mind which comprises many. Though he never fully endorses this idea, its recurrence in so many texts indicates his fascination with the idea of such a union's possibilities—and limitations. "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," the first story

in the collection that includes “Pierre Menard”¹—explores the collaborative invention of an imaginary ideal world, existing at first only as text, which slowly imposes on and replaces the world we think of as reality. Borges as narrator tells us that, in trying to figure out who had invented Tlon, he and his associates “unanimously rejected the idea of a single creator;” rather, they conjecture that the world of Tlon has come into being through “the work of a secret society...all under this supervision of an unknown genius” following “a strict, systematic plan” that is “so vast that each individual contribution to it is infinitesimal” (22). In the lengthy explication of the systems of Tlon that follows—its philosophy, its language, its literature and mathematics—Borges tells of a Tlonian heresiarch who, “in the orthodox tradition, advanced a most daring hypothesis...[that] there is only one Individual, and that this indivisible Individual is every one of the separate beings in the universe” (27). In the same vein, “in Tlon the source of all-knowing is single and eternal,” and “the dominant [Tlonian] notion is that everything is the work of one single author...the concept of plagiarism does not exist; it has been established that all books are the work of one single writer, who is timeless and anonymous. Criticism is prone to invent authors” and “works of fiction are based on a single plot, which runs through every imaginable permutation” (28). The connection between an individual writer and his particular literary production is destroyed in Tlon, as is the idea of individual writers and works as distinct from one another.

Borges’s choice to place “Tlön” first in this collection is suggestive; many of the stories which follow “Tlön” pick up and elaborate on ideas, or aspects of ideas,

¹ *The Garden of Forking Paths*, Part One of *Ficciones*

contained in it. Considering Borges's proclivity for the detective story, readers would do well to follow the leads given by the order in which Borges's stories appear—but that is another essay for another day. For the purposes of this essay, let us begin by examining how "Pierre Menard" interacts with some of the notions about authorship that Borges introduces in "Tlon." The project itself—of a second mind which seeks "to produce pages which would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes" (49), who died some 300 years before the birth of Menard, echoes the Tlonian doctrine of one mind which encompasses many, and of literary production as permutation. Even as Menard is attributing the *Quixote* to himself, he is conceptually detaching the individual author from the text he produces, thus leaving the text as it exists in and of itself unclaimed. If both he and Miguel de Cervantes can write the exact same text, who—or what—is in possession of it? How can two people have created the same thing? Menard considers the *Quixote* as a text independent from its original author, able to exist apart from him, thus subverting the image of the author as a creator and originator, even as—ironically—Menard claims the text for himself.

In making this claim, Menard reveals that he still thinks of the author in terms of what he or she has generated. Though he declares that, "Every man should be capable of all ideas, and I believe that in the future he will be" (54), espousing a philosophy and undertaking a project fit for the idealists of Tlon, "Menard seems to be drawing from two apparently contradictory sources of knowledge, pure creativity, as well as an archetypal realm where works of literature exist *in potencia*, that is, in their as-yet-to-be-created form" (Giskin 110). Rather than being a second author of *Don Quixote*, Menard wants us to

believe that has rediscovered the text—just as Cervantes discovered it—in the Platonic realm of universal Forms, where it is “waiting to be created or discovered by another” (110). By implying that has access to something which exists beyond our conception of the text as Cervantes’s possession, Menard attempts to account for his argument that the *Quixote* belongs to him just as it belongs to Cervantes. Menard asks readers to believe that he is not copying Cervantes’s text, but rather accessing the text that Cervantes accessed in the early seventeenth century. However, Menard’s desire to possess the *Quixote* reveals his preoccupation with what the attribution of a text to an author can do for that author. Not only does Menard claim that he has equal access to the potentiality of this text with the celebrated figure of Miguel de Cervantes—celebrated for having written the *Quixote*—but that he has an equal ability to realize that potentiality. He seeks to write *Don Quixote* word-for-word as Cervantes wrote it, and in so doing confer upon himself a status comparable with Cervantes’s. Though he deconstructs what Nadia Lie calls “the romantic notion of the author as source,” he still manages to endorse it in his desire to have written the *Quixote* out of his own experience.

The conflation of authorship in “Pierre Menard” lends itself to a biographical reading of the story, examining Borges himself in relation to Menard in relation to Cervantes. Borges posits in “A Profession of Literary Faith,” an essay written some thirteen years before “Menard,” that “all literature, in the end, is autobiographical” (67). Years later, he was also conceptualizing writing as rewriting, and experimenting with the idea that all works are ultimately a part of the same work (Alazraki 101-104). As Rosemary Arrojo points out, Borges opened his first collection of poems with the following: “If the pages of this book happen

to contain any apt line, may the reader forgive me the discourtesy of having stolen it from you. [...] The circumstances which make you the reader of these exercises and me their writer are trivial and fortuitous” (qtd. from *Obra poética* 22; Arrojo’s translation). Unlike Menard, Borges is most fastidious about acknowledging that his writing was the rewriting of others’, remarking, “Everything I have written could be found in Poe, Stevenson, Wells, Chesterton, and some others” (qtd. in Alazraki 103). However, Borges, like his character, is drawn to *Don Quixote*; merely skimming a collection of his nonfiction will turn up a great number of references to it, and “Pierre Menard” makes use of the kind of panoply of authors that appears in the *Quixote*. Arrojo argues that Borges, with his proclivity for translating work he admires, like Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, reveals his own Bloomian “anxiety of influence,” identifying himself with his artistic role models (in this case, Cervantes and Whitman) through acts of translation and transference. Admiration for an author and work evolve into wanting to *be* that author and to have created the work in question. Through translation, in Borges’s case, and reproduction, in Menard’s, an author might identify himself with an esteemed author by in some way laying claim to that author’s work, blurring the distinction between the reader of a work and its author—a distinction already blurred by the resonance of an author’s words with his/her reader.

Compared to Borges, Menard’s anxiety of influence results in a far more antagonistic relationship with his literary father, Cervantes. In actively seeking to write the *Quixote*, Menard not only conflates himself with Cervantes, but attempts to claim an even higher status than his predecessor for the production

of an identical text. He is not content to produce the *Quixote* in the same way that Cervantes did, though that is his first instinct: “to know Spanish well, to re-embrace the Catholic faith, to fight against Moors and Turks, to forget European history between 1602 and 1918, and to *be* Miguel de Cervantes” (49). The narrator informs us that, though Menard was having some limited success with this procedure, he “rejected it as too easy.... To be, in the twentieth century, a popular novelist of the seventeenth seemed to him a diminution” (49) Rather, Menard believes that it would be more arduous—and therefore more interesting—“to continue being Pierre Menard and to arrive at *Don Quixote* through the experiences of Pierre Menard” (49). Further, we are told, “This conviction...forced him to exclude the autobiographical prologue of the second part of *Don Quixote*” which would “have meant presenting *Don Quixote* as the work of this personage and not of Menard” (49). In rejecting the method of total identification with an author as a means of producing that author’s text, Menard reveals his uneasiness about sharing this work with Cervantes, or seeming to have copied him. His admiration for Cervantes first translates into wanting to be Cervantes and to have what he has, then evolves into wanting to surpass him by doing the same thing he has done but with more “interesting,” complex results. The status of the text, and therefore its creator, will be heightened; the intellectual achievement will be greater under a writer with the work itself as a context because it will have to take that context, and “the three hundred years [that] have passed, charged with the most complex happenings,” into account in order to come to the same textual conclusion as Cervantes. It is vital to Menard’s project for the *Quixote* that he produces to be known unambiguously as *his*,

though he certainly expects readers to be aware of Cervantes's novel and to use Cervantes's work in interpreting and evaluating his own. Plausible interpretations of the *Quixote* are necessarily increased under Menard's authorship not only because of the shift in historical period, but because the *Quixote* already exists as a point of comparison—and readings of the *Quixote* will forever after have to deal with the context and consequences of its repetition.

The question must now be asked: is Menard's *Quixote* separate from Cervantes's? Jesús Aguilar, in [title of his article], asks the question more elegantly: "is Borges suggesting the existence of *two* works, one written by Cervantes and the other by Menard," as critics tend to assume, "or only *one* work which has two authors" (173)? Aguilar, for his part, argues that "Borges's fiction is sufficiently ambiguous to permit a justified reading in which the whole challenge which Menard set himself consists in performing the incredible feat of writing again the only *Don Quixote*: 'No...otro Quijote—lo cual es fácil—sino *el Quijote*'"² The italicization of the definite article seems to be what Aguilar is drawing attention to here, though he does not say so outright. This italicization places emphasis on the article as definite; that is to say, it emphasizes both the *Quixote*'s status and its singularity. There is only *the Quixote*; there is no other *Quixote*. The singularity of the text does not allow for the existence of an identical text that is not, in the end, itself—but, to Menard's way of thinking, this singularity has no bearing on who can lay claim to the text. In order for him to attribute the text to himself, it was necessary for him to detach the author from

² The translation which I am using figures this as, "He did not want to compose another *Don Quixote*—which would be easy—but *the Don Quixote*" (48).

the linguistic event of the text; the author becomes a part of the *work*, the meaning of a piece of literature, rather than an intrinsic part of the text itself, in the reading process.

Creative, Critical Reading

Reading, in Borges, is essential to the production of literary meaning—in elevating a text from a purely linguistic event to a work with significance and consequences. As Erick Felinto, writing about Borges’s theory of reading as it appears in “Pierre Menard,” explains

the collaboration of the reader takes on more importance than that of the author, since it is the task of the former to realize the hermeneutic movement that leads to the actualization of the text... The meaning of the text does not preexist the hermeneutic act, but is constituted in the process itself. Each reader actualizes determined latent potentialities in the text (4, qtd. in Giskin 105).

Because the reader is the one responsible for matching up sign with signified, then analyzing the connection or disparity between that which is directly signified by the text (its “latent potentialities”) and that which is indirectly signified through connotation, association, the structure and tone of the work, its relationship with other texts, any familiarity the reader might have with the author, etc., the reader is in no small way responsible for the impression of the work which he or she has formed by its end, and in this way is an indispensable participant in the process of literary creation. Each individual reader is involved in transforming preexisting texts into works, forming interpretations of them

which then exist, in each individual's mind, as the actual literary work in question—and each individual's impression of that work necessarily diverges from his fellows', though commonalities occur.

Just as there are many authors in “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” so too are there many readers; in fact, all of the characters in “Pierre Menard,” in addition to Borges as a writer and the reader in the real world who sits with Borges's text in front of him or her, can be considered readers in some sense. Gerard Genette's *Palimpsests*, a work that takes its title from a passage in “Pierre Menard³,” helps to elucidate the way in which Borges's stories are the progeny of both writing and reading:

By attributing the invention of his stories to others, Borges...presents his writing as a reading; he disguises his writing as reading. The two procedures are, of course, complementary; they merge into a single metaphor of the complex and ambiguous relations between writing and reading. These relations...are most evidently the heart and soul of hypertextual activity (qtd. in Alazraki 108).

The narrator, an anonymous commentator and friend of Menard's, is, like Borges, a peculiar kind of reader who crosses over between reading and writing: the narrator is a critic, whose role in constructing Menard as an author is, as Nadia Lie argues, crucial, and who—perhaps more importantly—acts as a guide to other readers. The critic is a public reader with the potential to influence the

³ “I have thought that it is legitimate to consider the “final” *Don Quixote* as a kind of palimpsest, in which should appear traces—tenuous but not indecipherable—of the ‘previous’ handwriting of our friend” (54).

readings of others, but, like an author of fiction, in order to be convincing, the critic must win his or her readers' trust.

From the first page of "Pierre Menard," the narrator is preoccupied with legitimizing himself as a critic, attempting to justify the privileged position he has taken in commemorating Pierre Menard and commenting on the late author's intellectual endeavors. In order to confer legitimacy on himself, he must also ensure that Menard's status as the author of the *Quixote* is legitimate; in order to endorse the text that he is reading publicly, its originality—that is to say, its having been created, not copied, by the author to whom it is attributed—must be established. Menard's legitimacy, and that of his work, bears on the legitimacy of his anonymous critic. At the risk of being too reductive, to confer legitimacy upon an author and his/her text is to orient them within a given context, determining their status both with relation to the works and authors which precede and inform their work and with regards to the cultural context out of which they are written, to borrow Daniel Balderson's deliberate misreading of the phrase "out of context" in the title of his book investigating the historicity of Borges's highly allusive writings (15). The processes through which this legitimization takes place are essentially performative, aimed at conferring a tenuously constructed—but, to the narrator, highly regarded—value upon a text and its perceived creator.

In the second paragraph of "Pierre Menard," the narrator, who acknowledges that "it would be very easy to challenge [his] meager authority," calls upon the approbation of two of his aristocratic connections, the Baroness de Bacourt and the Countess de Bagnoregio, in order to justify his rectification of the

Error which is “trying to tarnish [Menard’s] Memory” (45). Not only does the paragraph detailing the authorizations of the Baroness and Countess call attention to the narrator and Menard’s aristocratic connections, thus heightening their social status by association, but this paragraph also points to the aristocracy’s role as the gatekeepers of cultural convention, the mechanism by which works of literature are praised or censured. In aligning himself with the social class which seems to determine the legitimacy of intellectual and artistic enterprise, the narrator attempts to confer upon himself an authoritative intellectual status.

Though the narrator assumes that his claim to authority through an alignment with the institutions which appear to dictate the value of a given work or author is successful, such may not be the case. Jorge Gracia refers to the phenomenon of institutions as determiners of the particular qualities defining a work as the *institutional view*, an interpretive mechanism which “leads to a vicious circle or an infinite regress” (89). Because it does not identify what features, exactly, confer a high or low status upon a given work, the institutional view is imprecise, unpredictable, and highly contingent upon the preferences of a certain class of individuals rather than attempting to demarcate what qualities make a work deserving of praise. Thus, the narrator’s attempt to legitimize his authority through an identification of himself with the aristocracy does not succeed; rather, in even making such an attempt, the narrator subverts his “meager authority” because he draws attention to his own fallacious conviction that the approval of the upper classes bestows value and high status upon a writer.

The passage in which the narrator attempts to corroborate his authority by appropriating aristocratic support comes after a paragraph in which the narrator attacks Madame Henri Bachelier, who has apparently published a “fallacious catalogue” of Menard’s “visible works” in a newspaper with “Protestant tendencies [which] are no secret,” and readers who are “few and Calvinist, if not Masonic and circumcised” (45). The narrator seems to be attempting legitimization here as well. His invective against Mme Bachelier and the readers of the newspaper that has published her catalogue effectively sets up an opposition between the veracity of his work and the falsity of the lady’s, compounded by her—to the narrator—dubious readers. However, the narrator’s diatribe rather unequivocally suggests that the narrator has an unapologetically Catholic bias. That the narrator’s bias is Catholic is not particularly relevant to my argument, but the evincing of a clear bias taints the narrator’s account for the rest of the story. Since he has made clear that he is capable both of bias for his aristocratic connections and against both Madame Bachelier and non-Catholics, the narrator’s capacity for prejudice must be taken into account in evaluating his legitimacy as an author. If the narrator is not impartial, then his qualitative analysis of Pierre Menard’s work is necessarily dubious. His arguments are suspect because there is a possibility that they are not objective or even trying to be objective.

The narrator later attacks Mme Bachelier for listing “a literal translation of a literal translation done by Quevedo of the *Introduction à la vie devote* of Saint Francis of Sales,” remarking that “in Pierre Menard’s library there are no traces of such a work” and insisting that “she must have misunderstood a remark of his

which he had intended as a joke” (47). Ironically, the narrator confesses to having omitted one of Pierre Menard’s visible works from the list: “some vague, circumstantial sonnets for the hospitable, or greedy, album of Madame Henri Bachelier” (48). This is yet another example of his antagonism with Mme Bachelier and an attempt to set himself up as an authority in comparison with her, an attempt which, due to the inadequacies the narrator’s own words reveal, is quite unsuccessful. Even more tellingly, the narrator counts the *Quixote*, of which he admits there are no traces of in Menard’s library, as not only one of Menard’s achievements, but as his most monumental. By saying that Madame Bachelier has misunderstood a joke of Menard’s but assuming that he himself has not misunderstood Menard’s undertaking of the *Quixote*—and taking into account that Menard has a tendency to say exactly the opposite of what he means (cf. invective against Valéry in the catalogue)—the narrator inadvertently points to his own vulnerability as an interpreter. How can we, as readers, trust what he has to say if he censures others for a supposed misunderstanding when there is a possibility that he himself has misunderstood Menard’s project? This passage casts doubt on whether or not Menard even undertook the *Don Quixote* project; ironic, since the narrator promotes Menard’s undertaking as a colossal feat.

The narrator is careful to inform us of Menard’s other writings—or at least the ones he feels are important to his reading of Menard. The catalogue listing Menard’s “visible work”—a traditional feature of the kind of literary eulogy the narrator presents—functions within the story both as the narrator’s attempt to enhance his reader’s sense of his privileged position and as an attempt to establish Menard as a prolific writer—a move towards making Menard’s Quixotic

undertaking acceptable within the community for which he is writing. However, Borges, in “An Investigation of the Word,” reproaches the impulse to construe such a list as authoritative, insisting that “summaries add a false categorical and definitive air to whatever they condense” (27). The act of listing and glossing Menard’s visible works, then, speaks less powerfully than the items themselves. In fact, the articles and other writings which comprise the catalogue of Pierre Menard’s visible work subverts Menard’s reliability as an author, thus counteracting the narrator’s claim to legitimacy for them both on these grounds.

The use of dates in this catalogue of Pierre Menard’s visible work (46-47), a feature which might ordinarily be overlooked, contributes to the narrator’s attempt to legitimize Menard’s status as an author. Borges even says, in “The Detective Story,” “I am weak on dates,” indicating that dates themselves are, in comparison with the larger aspects of establishing a historical context for a piece, very paltry devices indeed. The fussy dating in the catalogue, traditional for such a list, can here be read as an alignment of content with historical truth through chronological ordering—that is to say, a publication looks more legitimate with a date attached to it, whether or not the publication does indeed exist. Since the narrator is obsessed with proving his own legitimacy, and considering his insistence on the existence of a work which he cannot prove actually existed, this stratagem is ineffective and only heightens the irony of the piece. The irony is intensified further when the narrator muses on Menard’s view of historical truth—“not what took place, [but] what we think took place” (53), thus indicating that historical truth is not objective and that, indeed, it does not necessarily exist.

In Section e of the catalogue, concerning a piece Menard wrote on the possibility of changing a rule of chess, Menard “proposes, recommends, disputes, and ends by rejecting this innovation” (46). This article shows the process of Menard’s efforts rather than just the end result, unlike the *Don Quixote* project, in which Menard destroys all evidence of his process (49). The article on chess draws a distinction between literary work and the workings of philosophy, in which, as Gracia explains, the process of creating an idea must be explicated (100). Menard inverts the purpose of philosophical processes in the article on chess; rather than supporting his proposal through logic, Menard ultimately disproves its value and rejects the proposal he himself put forward, rendering the article a parody of philosophy and Menard a parody of a philosopher. Though Menard isn’t saying the opposite of what he means, he is talking himself out of what he means. Menard undercuts his own argument, and in doing so, essentially undercuts all his arguments because he casts doubt on his own legitimacy as an author.

Section p describes an invective Menard wrote against Paul Valéry, and the narrator comments parenthetically that it “is the exact reverse of his true opinion of Valéry,” and that “the latter understood it as such” (47). Here, too, there is a contradiction, this time between what is said and what is meant as opposed to what is said in the beginning and what is said in the end. This invective is, in fact, a panegyric, if we are meant to understand that praise is the opposite of censure and interpret the work thus. Rather than creating meaning using the conventional meanings of words, Menard creates meaning through opposition in this piece. In expressing the exact opposite of what he means, Menard inverts the

semantic ordering of language, proposing a model of reading based on antonymy rather than synonymy and pointing to the arbitrary nature of language in that a given word could just as easily mean the opposite of what we perceive it to mean based on the conventions of the particular language in which it is used. This model differentiates further between what the author creates and what the reader creates in literature. Because it insists on a different system of significance for words, the separation between sign and signified—between text and work—is enlarged. More context, in this case about the semantic system the author has chosen to use, is needed in order to evaluate the author's intentions in writing a given piece. The author reads his work differently than would a reader unfamiliar with the author's unexpressed intentions.

The privileged position the narrator holds with regards to Menard further distances him from Menard's other readers and heightens his claims to a superior reading of Menard's life and writings. In asserting the objectivity of his catalogue over Madame Bachelier's, in extensively quoting from Menard's letters, and in claiming to have a wealth of personal knowledge about him, the narrator wants his readers to believe that he has obtained "an inside view of another character," and in believing that he is so privileged, to give great credence to his rhetorical powers, and have "absolute faith in his powers of divination" (Booth 160). If the reader caves to the narrator's demands for this faith, he or she will be forced to trust the narrator's commentary (214), and thus to accept his reading of Menard's work on the grounds that he is more knowledgeable than someone with less firsthand—or is it secondhand?—knowledge about the great author's intentions. The narrator privileges his reading of Menard based on the assumption that he

has correctly interpreted everything Menard has told him, and that, in interpreting a literary text, the author's intentions should be privileged above other means of evaluation. However, Menard, as the narrator acknowledges, remarking upon Menard's "resigned or ironic habit of propounding ideas which were the strict reverse of those he preferred" (52), has a habit of saying things that are the opposite of what he means. Without knowing the intention behind the expressed intention, it is impossible for the attentive reader to wholly trust the narrator, who has ironically revealed his unreliability—even as he explicitly seeks to convince us that he is reliable.

Though the creative role of the reader in Borges is affirmed, the infallibility of the reader is firmly denied. The narrator, a privileged reader and critic, has been laid open for the reader of Borges's text. His agenda, as well as his errors, prejudices, and assumptions, are embedded in the text, though one must read attentively to unearth them. However, once the reader has spotted and evaluated the narrator's vulnerabilities, the reader must evaluate his or her own reading, and might be forced to confront the errors, prejudices, and assumptions that influenced his or her interpretation of the text. "Pierre Menard" is not only metafiction, but *metareading*. Just as metafictional writings "reject the traditional figure of the author as a transcendental imagination fabricating...structures of order which will replace the forgotten material text of the world" and reveal the "author" as "a concept produced through previous and existing literary and social texts" (Waugh 16), Borges's metareading rejects the reader as a transcendental source of meaning, revealing that the reader is also constructed, a product of his or her particular social, intellectual, cultural, and

historical context as well as his or her own personal motivations, antagonisms, and proclivities. However, the rejection of the reader and author as *transcendental* sources of meaning does not wholly nullify the power of either to create meaning—it merely cautions us against giving too much credence to any interpretation of a work as objective, including the author’s and our own.

Reading Into History

Though no interpretation of a work can achieve objectivity, that is not to say that criticism has no value. The narrator may lament that

There is no intellectual exercise which is not ultimately useless. A philosophical doctrine is in the beginning a seemingly true description of the universe; as the years pass it becomes a mere chapter—if not a paragraph or noun—in the history of philosophy.

In literature, this ultimate decay is even more notorious” (53),

but this is not necessarily so. Criticism will never produce irrefutable results, and the shifting, subjective traditions of literature that arise in each new age inevitably bring about a reevaluation of old texts and ideas in comparison with new ones, but to say that this reevaluation leads to an “ultimate decay,” and that intellection is “ultimately useless,” is to sound the doomsday trumpet without cause. A text which seems to decay under one theoretical regime might be rediscovered and reinvigorated when the next generation of thinkers becomes influential. Not only that, but interpretations, especially of major texts like the *Quixote*, have consequences that are not always strictly intellectual.

History is defined not only in terms of the literary works that are produced

during a particular period, but the way in which works are made and received. In “Pierre Menard,” Borges proposes that the history of interpretation and use of specific works literature should bear on the way we examine a period. In some ways, we already regard history in this way, but our idea of intellectual history generally depends more on who was writing what during a given period and what the broader theory of the age looked like, and less on how a particular reading of a particular text might help us understand the readers of the age instead of trying so hard to understand the writers. Are there scholars of literature who study the reception of the *Quixote* in certain ages? Likely, yes, but are there historians who study an age in terms of how it responded to and made use of major texts—texts that, like the *Quixote*, have come to be regarded as Ur-texts—outside of literature, philosophy, and theory? I have never encountered such a study, though medievalists come very close in their studies of the appropriation of classics like the *Aeneid* during the Middle Ages, but “Pierre Menard” suggests that this kind of historicism might be worth exploring.

A far more macroscopic project would be required in order to investigate and evaluate any proposal for a new historiography, but let us examine the function of historical context, of which tradition is a part, in “Pierre Menard.” The much-studied passage in which the narrator quotes two identical passages of the *Quixote*, one which is attributed to Cervantes and the other to Menard, not only raises the question raised by the story as a whole—whether or not it is possible for the same text to be attributed to two different authors—but also engages with the issue of tradition’s interpretive influence and the function of history. The narrator’s first iteration of the passage names Menard as its author:

*...truth, whose mother is history, who is the rival of time,
depository of deeds, witness of the past, example and lesson to the
present, and warning to the future.*

Written in the seventeenth century, written by the “ingenious layman” Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical eulogy of history (53).

The narrator goes on to quote the same passage from Part One, Chapter Nine of the *Quixote*, but this time attributes it to Menard, marveling at the idea that “a contemporary of William James does not define history as an investigation of reality, but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what took place; it is what we think took place” (53). The narrator’s interpretation of the passage is immediately dependent on the intellectual context in which it was created and the interpretive conventions—let us call them traditions—of the historical period in which each ostensible author is located. For Cervantes, who predates pragmatism, to call history the mother of truth was, according to the narrator’s reading, nothing but a grandiose flourish of language whose purpose does not extend beyond the stylistic. The narrator credits Menard, on the other hand, with being “shamelessly pragmatic,” reading into Pierre Menard’s status as a contemporary of William James⁴ in interpreting this passage. Context, here, is the key to differentiation, and allows for the same words to be read as though they were authored by two different people. Tradition’s capacity to create

⁴ Balderson discusses “Pierre Menard’s” connection to pragmatism and other philosophical and literary systems in the second chapter of *Out of Context*.

meaning is thus foregrounded. The narrator's insistence upon reading the passage based on its perceived context points to the way tradition has morphed from the seventeenth century to the twentieth and endorses the idea—one voiced by the narrator, but which Borges seems to endorse rather than subvert—that “ambiguity is a richness” (53). That a text has multiple possibilities for meaning does not necessarily weaken it; rather, in the multifarious readings that readers can make of a text, the flexibility of language, the diversity of intellection, and, ultimately, the tremendous capacity of the human mind are celebrated.

This act of interpretation based on the traditions of two different historical periods champions the richness of ambiguity, and the position Borges, in this passage, takes with regards to tradition as an interpretive mechanism is certainly ambiguous. Critics have broached arguments on both sides of the issue, but the most striking arguments have in common an interest in the effects of the new *Quixote* and its interpretations on the work of the original, looking both at the text as Menard's and the work as a product of Menard's historical context. In one passage of “Pierre Menard,” the narrator construes the whole *Quixote* as having been written by Menard rather than simply the fragments he claimed to have produced. The narrator leans close and says,

Shall I confess that I often imagine that he [Menard] finished it and that I am reading *Don Quixote*—the entire work—as if Menard had conceived it? Several nights ago, while leafing through Chapter XXVI—which he had never attempted—I recognized our friend's style and, as it were, his voice in this exceptional phrase: *the nymphs of the rivers, mournful and humid Echo*. This effective

combination of two adjectives, one moral and the other physical, reminded me of a line from Shakespeare which we discussed one afternoon....” (50).

As Nadia Lie proposes in “Who is the Reader of Pierre Menard?” in this passage, the narrator inverts the chronological influence of the works; the narrator “ends up looking at the more recent work as the ‘original,’ the ‘influence’ being construed ex post facto” (94). Reading in this way, Lie argues, “presents Cervantes’s text as ‘secondary’ to Menard’s on an axiological level: the French writer’s text is considered both incomparably more complex and subtle than Cervantes’s” (92). Indeed, the narrator makes these very claims, referring to Menard’s text as “more subtle” (51) and “almost infinitely richer” than Cervantes’s. The later text, in being so far removed in time and space from its setting, and in having been potentially influenced by 300 more years’ worth of “the most complex happenings”—including the original text—seems, to the narrator, more of an achievement than Cervantes’s *Quixote*, which becomes a shade of Menard’s.

The idea that a text might be exerted ex post facto brings to mind another passage from “Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” describing a curious object, called a *hronir*, which is a repetition of another object:

In the very oldest regions of Tlon, it is not an uncommon occurrence for lost objects to be duplicated. Two people are looking for a pencil; the first one finds it and says nothing; the second finds a second pencil, no less real, but more in keeping with his expectation. These secondary objects are called *hronir*, and, even

though awkward in form, are a little larger than the originals (29). The *hrönir* have allowed Tlon's past to be questioned and even modified; Tlon's past, Borges tells us, "is no less malleable or obedient than [its] future" (30). Menard's *Don Quixote* is in some ways a *hronir* of Cervantes's; it is a duplication, a secondary object which is "a little larger" than the original in that more has influenced it; whose style is a bit more awkward—the narrator calls Menard's handling of 17th century Spanish "affected" in comparison to Cervantes's easy handling of his native tongue (53)—but which changes the past as it exists in the mind of the reader. This idea can also be found in T.S. Eliot's influential 1919 essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in which Eliot explores the connection between the artist and the works which have preceded the artist. Eliot claims that an author must recognize that he/she is engaging with a rich inherited tradition, one that bears on the reader's understanding of new work, and that any new art will alter the audience's conception of preexisting works.

Eliot's essay also suggests that literary tradition serves an important evaluative function. In supplying other texts as points of comparison and building certain frameworks of meaning—the literary systems and categories into which texts fall—literary tradition provides interpretive patterns for the interaction of a piece's form and content. Since this essay appeared 20 years before Borges wrote and published "Pierre Menard," the likelihood that Borges was engaging with it to some extent in this story is high. However, critics disagree about the conclusions to which Borges comes on tradition. José Venegas, writing on Borges's engagement with Eliot's theory of tradition, maintains that "Menard's (re)writing of Cervantes's novel forcefully undermines the very idea of tradition

as meaning-production” (240), and that, in “Menard,” Borges seeks to counteract the influence of tradition. On the other hand, Daniel Cottom, writing about tradition in Borges more broadly, proclaims that “art departs from and yet still must recall baffling tradition, which is a miracle in disguise, forever threatening even as it looks after us” (11) and that “no matter how the past may be imaged, and even if it is made out to be absolutely surpassed, tradition is inextricable from the act of representation. That is why we cannot stop learning how to do things with tradition—even, and especially, when what we are doing is denying it” (7).

Cottom’s point that tradition is at once a guide and a threat, and that in denying it, we are still making use of it, aligns most closely with my own reading of Borges’s implicit commentary on tradition. Tradition cannot wholly be denied, because the act of denying it illuminates its power. However, that should not stop us from evaluating it—especially when tradition begins to create a work whose significance has more to do with the status of a text than with its content. When a person or group of people who have not read and analyzed the text—non-readers, in both the sense that they have not read the actual text and that they have not created a meaning for it based on that reading—make use of a text without having come to an individual understanding of it. The narrator of “Pierre Menard” relates Menard’s frustration with this kind of non-reading:

“*Don Quixote*,” Menard once told me, “was above all an agreeable book; now it is an occasion for patriotic toasts, grammatical arrogance, and obscene deluxe editions. Glory is an incomprehension, and perhaps the worst” (53).

Though tradition, when applied critically by the reader, can and does produce meaning, which Borges illustrates in the “history, mother of truth” passage, tradition that elevates a text without analyzing it is unproductive and potentially dangerous. Whether or not a person understands a text, be it *Don Quixote*, a religious text, or a government document, that person’s beliefs concerning the text—and the actions spurred by those beliefs—can have real consequences for both individuals and the societies of which they are a part.

In acts of reading as in acts of writing, we reveal our own agendas, our frailties, the conventions of the day and age of which we are a part, even as we try to make things new. As we read, not only do we collaborate with the author in constructing the meaning of a piece of literature, but we decide what the consequences of a work are—the use to which it can be put, its relevance to us, and its importance on any number of levels. As Evan Watkins remarks in *The Critical Act*, any time the reader, and especially the critic, makes a value judgment about a literary work, “the critic also allows the [work] to judge him,” and “genuine critical value judgments thus become reciprocal” (217). If historical truth is, as the narrator of “Pierre Menard” believes Menard to have implied, “not what took place” but “what we think took place,” then our readings and our critical writings are not arbitrary or meaningless. In the Prologue to *The Garden of Forking Paths*, Borges informs us that “the list of writings that I attribute to [Menard] is not too amusing but neither is it arbitrary; it constitutes a diagram of his mental history....” (15). Just as the works of Pierre Menard the reader are a diagram of his mental history, so too are our readings—and the use to which we put them—collectively a diagram of our culture’s history, mental and otherwise.

Bibliography

- Aguilar, Jesús. "Can Pierre Menard be the author of Don Quixote?" *Variaciones Borges*. 8.1 (1999). 166-177.
- Alazraki, Jaime. "Borges's Modernism and the New Critical Idiom." *Borges and His Successors*. Edna Aizenberg, ed. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990.
- Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno*. Trans. Michael Palma. Ed. Giuseppe Mazzotta. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2008.
- Arrojo, Rosemary. "Translation, Transference, and the Attraction to Otherness—Borges, Menard, Whitman." *diacritics*. 34.3/4 (204). 31-53.
- Balderson, Daniel. *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence*. 2nd edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Detective Story." Trans. Suzanne Jill Levine. *On Writing*. Suzanne Jill Levine, ed. New York: Penguin Books, 2010.
- "Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*." Trans. Anthony Bonner. *Ficciones*. New York: Grove Press, 1962.
- "A Profession of Literary Faith." Trans. Suzanne Jill Levine. *On Writing*. Suzanne Jill Levine, ed. New York: Penguin Books, 2010.
- "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." Trans. Alastair Reid. *Ficciones*. New York: Grove Press, 1962.
- Cottom, Daniel. *Ravishing Tradition: Cultural Forces and Literary History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.
- Eliot, T.S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. 1922. Full text available <<http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html>>. Accessed 8 December 2010.
- Giskin, Howard. "Borges Revisioning of Reading in 'Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote.'" *Variaciones Borges*. 19.1 (2005). 103-123.
- Gracia, Jorge J.E. "Borges's 'Pierre Menard': Philosophy or Literature?" *Literary Philosophers: Borges, Calvino, Eco*. Jorge J. E. Gracia, Carolyn Korsmeyer,

Rodolphe Gasché, eds.

Lie, Nadia. "Who is the Reader of Pierre Menard? Borges on Cervantes Revisited." *International Don Quixote*. Theo D'haen and Reindert Dhondt, eds. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009.

Venegas, José Luis. "Eliot, Borges, Tradition, and Irony." *Symposium*. Winter 2006. 237-255.

Watkins, Evan. *The Critical Act: Criticism and Community*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978.