

# Cervantes, Menard and Borges

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*The article examines Borges's 'Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote' from the biographical, autobiographical, allegorical, critical, aesthetic and bibliographical perspective. In all these contexts, the story reveals itself as either explicitly or implicitly self-referential, reading in each instance itself in its relation to the author, the publication and the reader.*

Keywords: Borges, Jorge Luis / *Don Quixote* / Cervantes / reading / fiction / pastiche

UDK 821.134.2(82).09Borges J.L.

My intention to say something new about the story that is undoubtedly one of the most commented upon, analysed and interpreted texts of the twentieth century, is quite hopeless.

Nonetheless I have to give it a try. I will approach the problem in a scholastic manner, trying to uncover the sedimented senses of the story 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*', which was characterised by Borges as 'a halfway house between the essay and the true tale' (Borges and di Giovanni, 'An Autobiographical' 171). However, unlike the scholastics, I shall not ground my reading in the four Biblical senses (the historical, the analogical, the moral and the anagogical), but shall rather excavate from 'Pierre Menard' six different senses: the biographical, the reflexive, the allegorical, the critical, the aesthetic and the bibliographical.

1. The first sense is biographical. The story was published in the journal *Sur* in May 1939, and in 1941 it appeared in a collection in whose title contains a botanical metaphor à la Antonio de Torquemada, *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* ('The Garden of Forking Paths'). In 'An Autobiographical Essay', dictated to Norman Thomas di Giovanni, Borges relates the story to an accident that occurred on 24 December 1938, leaving him unconscious and unable to speak:

It was on Christmas Eve of 1938 – the same year my father died – that I had a severe accident. I was running up a stairway and suddenly felt something brush my scalp. I had grazed a freshly painted open casement window. In spite of first-aid treatment, the wound became poisoned, and for a period of a week or so I lay sleepless every night and had hallucinations and high fever. One evening, I lost the

power of speech and had to be rushed to the hospital for an immediate operation. Septicemia had set in, and for a month I hovered, all unknowingly, between life and death. (Much later, I was to write about this in my story “The South.”) When I began to recover, I feared for my mental integrity. [...] A bit later, I wondered whether I could ever write again. I had previously written quite a few poems and dozens of short reviews. I thought that if I tried to write a review now and failed, I’d be all through intellectually but that if I tried something I have never really done before and failed at that it wouldn’t be so bad and might even prepare me for the final revelation. I decided I would try to write a story. The result was “Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*.” (Borges and di Giovanni, ‘An Autobiographical’ 170–171)

A fictional work about a writer who abandons his original creative power and reinvents an already written work is therefore a kind of inverted mirror of the fate of Borges, who tested his ability to write by abandoning the genres with which he had already been familiar (poetry, reviews, articles) in order to adopt a literary genre in which he had never written before: something that is neither an essay nor a story – or that is both.

2. This opens up the possibility of a different, autobiographical reading. In this sense, one might focus on the catalogue of nineteen books that comprise ‘[t]he visible *oeuvre*’ (‘[l]a obra visible’) (Borges, ‘Pierre Menard, Author’ 88; ‘Pierre Menard, autor’ 444) of Pierre Menard – in the same manner as scholasticism ascribes nineteen attributes to God. In a ludist fashion, the catalogue summarises Borges’s bibliographical experience from the time when he worked as a principal assistant librarian in a poor district of Buenos Aires, and was primarily responsible for the cataloguing of books. All the texts written by Pierre Menard might as well be written by Borges, and are pastiches of Borges’s own works. So, in Pierre Menard’s bibliography one comes across authors, works and themes that obsessed Borges before and after 1939: *Ars magna generalis* by Ramón Llull, the universal language of Leibniz or Wilkins, the problem of Achilles and the tortoise, the French poets Paul-Jean Toulet and Valéry. Pierre Menard’s notes, too, are similar to those of Borges: ‘Recuerdo sus cadernos cuadriculados, sus negras tachaduras, sus peculiares símbolos tipográficos y su letra de insecto.’ (Borges, ‘Pierre Menard, autor’ 450n1); ‘I recall his square-ruled notebooks, his black crossings-out, his peculiar typographical symbols, and his insect-like handwriting.’ (Borges, ‘Pierre Menard, Author’ 95n3)

This reflexive dimension of ‘Pierre Menard’, however, goes even beyond pastiche. In an interview conducted by James Irby in 1962 (and published in the 1964 volume *Cahier de l’Herne* dedicated to Borges) Borges emphasises that his stories are ‘but notes to other books’ (Borges, *J. Luis Borges* 398). This is why many of the texts collected in *Fictions* in 1944, are rewritings of already existing works: rewritten are José Hernández’s *Martín*

*Fierro* (in ‘The End’), De Quincy’s *Judas Iscariot* (in ‘Three Versions of Judas’) and Kafka’s ‘Prometheus’; Borges translated Kafka’s ‘Metamorphosis’ in 1938, immediately after having translated two books by Virginia Woolf.

Yet Borges is not the author of the story ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*’. The text was written in 1939 by a friend of Menard’s who had the same anti-Protestant, anti-Semitic and anti-Masonic views as Menard. It is no accident that for the residence of Pierre Menard, Borges chose Nîmes, a city torn by conflicts between Protestants and Catholics since the second half of the sixteenth century. And it is no accident that the text written by Menard’s friend is dated 1939, the year of the publication of the story. Moreover, Borges knew very well that Charles Maurras’s political movement *Action Française*, which had a strong anti-Semitic and anti-Republican orientation and directed its attacks the Popular Front government with Léon Blum as its leader since 1936, was very successful in Provence.

3. One can also suggest an allegorical reading of ‘Pierre Menard’. Borges himself alluded to it in 1967, when he said to Georges Charbonnier the following about Pierre Menard:

Il y a chez lui un excès d’intelligence, un sens de l’inutilité de la littérature ; l’idée qu’il y a déjà trop de livres, que c’est un manque de politesse ou de culture que d’encombrer les bibliothèques avec des livres nouveaux ; une sorte de résignation enfin. (Charbonnier 111)

(There is in him an excess of intelligence, a sense of uselessness of literature; a thought that there are too many books, that the packing of libraries with new books betrays a lack of courtesy and refinement; and finally, a kind of resignation.)

One could also understand a reinvention of *Don Quixote* – that is, of a book already written – as an allegorical image of a world saturated with and drowning in books. In this sense ‘Pierre Menard’ is the inverted image of ‘The Library of Babel’; more precisely, ‘Pierre Menard’ is the ‘disproportionate depression’ (‘depresión excesiva’) that has followed the apparent ‘unbounded joy’ (‘extravagante felicidad’) that arose ‘[w]hen it was announced that the Library contained all the books’ (‘[c]uando se proclamó que la Biblioteca abarcaba todos los libros’) (Borges, ‘The Library’ 115–116; ‘La Biblioteca’ 468).

4. A critical reading would emphasise the experimental dimension of the story, which, much like the story ‘The Mirror and the Mask’, deals with the question of possible variations of the sense of a text that remains stable at the literal level. Like the prologues to *Celestina* and *Don Quixote*, ‘Pierre Menard’ belongs to the family of texts that reflect on various elements that produce different senses of a given work, for example, the age, the situation and the disposition of the readers and the audiences.

Yet Borges introduces the temporal difference as a crucial variable. So, the most spectacular example is the sentence about ‘history, the *mother* of truth’ (‘la historia, *madre* de la verdad’), whose sense has become utterly different after thinkers such as Nietzsche or William James:

Es una revelación cotejar el *Don Quijote* de Menard con el de Cervantes. Éste, por ejemplo, escribió (*Don Quijote*, primera parte, noveno capítulo):

... la verdad, cuya madre es la historia, émula del tiempo, depósito de las acciones, testigo de lo pasado, ejemplo y aviso de lo presente, advertencia de lo por venir.

Redactada en el siglo diecisiete, redactada por el ‘ingenio lego’ Cervantes, esa enumeración es un mero elogio retórico de la historia. Menard, en cambio, escribe:

... la verdad, cuya madre es la historia, émula del tiempo, depósito de las acciones, testigo de lo pasado, ejemplo y aviso de lo presente, advertencia de lo por venir.

La historia, *madre* de la verdad; la idea es asombrosa. Menard, contemporáneo de William James, no define la historia como una indagación de la realidad sino como su origen. La verdad histórica, para él, no es lo que sucedió; es lo que juzgamos que sucedió. Las cláusulas finales – *ejemplo y aviso de lo presente, advertencia de lo por venir* – son descaradamente pragmáticas. (Borges, ‘Pierre Menard, autor’ 449)

(It is a revelation to compare the *Don Quixote* of Pierre Menard with that of Miguel de Cervantes. Cervantes, for example, wrote the following [Part I, Chapter IX]:

... 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.

This catalog of attributes, written in the seventeenth century, and written by the ‘ingenious layman’ Miguel de Cervantes, is mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:

... 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.

History, the mother of truth! – the idea is staggering. Menard, a contemporary of William James, defines history not as a *delving into* reality but as the very *fount* of reality. Historical truth, for Menard, is not ‘what happened’; it is what we *believe* happened. The final phrases – *exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s counselor* – are brazenly pragmatic. [Borges, ‘Pierre Menard, Author’ 94]

Pierre Bourdieu once said, ‘A book changes even though it does not change, since the world changes.’ (Bourdieu and Chartier 236) This idea runs throughout Borges’s story. The production of sense is up to the reader, the reading and the reception: ‘El texto de Cervantes y el de Menard

son verbalmente idénticos, pero el segundo es casi infinitamente más rico.’; ‘The Cervantes text and the Menard text are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer.’ (Borges, ‘Pierre Menard, autor’ 449; ‘Pierre Menard, Author’ 94) What is put forward is the theme of a retrospective construction of the precursor:

Componer el Quijote a principios del siglo diecisiete era una empresa razonable, necesaria, acaso fatal; a principios del veinte, es casi imposible. No en vano han transcurrido trescientos años, cargados de complejísimos hechos. Entre ellos, para mencionar uno solo: el mismo Quijote. (‘Pierre Menard, autor’ 448)

(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. Among those events, to mention but one, is the *Quixote* itself. [‘Pierre Menard, Author’ 93])

Fiction invites us to practice anachronistic reading:

Menard (acaso sin quererlo) ha enriquecido mediante una técnica nueva el arte detenido y rudimentario de la lectura: la técnica del anacronismo deliberado y de las atribuciones erróneas. Esa técnica de aplicación infinita nos insta a recorrer la *Odisea* como si fuera posterior a la *Eneida* y el libro *Le jardin du Centaure* de madame Henri Bachelier como si fuera de madame Henri Bachelier. Esa técnica puebla de aventura los libros más calmosos. Atribuir a Louis Ferdinand Céline o a James Joyce la *Imitación de Cristo* ¿no es una suficiente renovación de esos tenues avisos espirituales? (‘Pierre Menard, autor’ 450)

(Menard has [perhaps unwittingly] enriched the slow and rudimentary art of reading by means of a new technique – the technique of deliberate anachronism and fallacious attribution. That technique, requiring infinite patience and concentration, encourages us to read the *Odyssey* as though it came after the *Eneid*, to read Mme. Henri Bachelier’s *Le jardin du Centaure* as though it were written by Mme. Henri Bachelier. 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? [‘Pierre Menard, Author’ 95])

Alberto Manguel recalls how thoroughly Borges enjoyed practicing the technique of anachronistic reading:

He amused himself with such subversions. ‘Imagine,’ he would say, ‘reading *Don Quixote* as if it were a detective novel. *En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme ...* [(Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quijote* 27) *In a village of La Mancha, whose name I have no intention to recall ...* (Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote* 17) – Translator’s note.] The author tells us he doesn’t want to remember the name of the village. Why? What clue is he concealing? As readers of a detective novel we are meant to suspect something, no?’ And he would laugh. (Manguel 84)

5. An aesthetic reading of 'Pierre Menard' always defines any writing as rewriting. Pierre Menard does not attempt to transcribe *Don Quixote*, he does not modernise it, he does not identify with its author. He refuses mechanical copying of the work as well as producing a contemporary *Don Quixote* or vainly trying to be Cervantes. He dedicates himself 'to repeating in a foreign tongue a book that already existed', 'en una idioma ajeno un libro preexistente' (Borges, 'Pierre Menard, Author' 95; 'Pierre Menard, autor' 450). Hence his radical and absurd kind of the aesthetics of literary creation as repetition – the aesthetics demanded by Borges. Talking to Georges Charbonnier, Borges affirms that this story tries to demonstrate 'that one invents nothing, that one works with one's memory or, more precisely, that one works in oblivion', 'qu'on n'invente rien, qu'on travaille avec la mémoire ou, pour parler d'une façon plus précise, qu'on travaille dans l'oubli' (Charbonnier 113).

6. The aesthetics of writing as rewriting opens up a new question and proposes a final, bibliographical reading. Pierre Menard reinvents *Don Quixote*. But which *Don Quixote*? The *Don Quixote* of the Castilian edition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which Menard read in Nîmes? The *Don Quixote* of the Garnier edition, which Borges read as a child in Buenos Aires? The *Don Quixote* of the *princeps* edition, which was published by Francisco de Robles and printed in Juan de la Cuesta's print shop in Madrid towards the end of 1604 and in which the episode of the theft and the retrieval of Sancho Panza's donkey is missing? Or perhaps the later edition containing Cervantes's additions for the Madrid reeditions of 1605 and 1608? In all these and in many other editions Cervantes's text is never constant. Sometimes it is the very literal meaning that changes, however, what is always changeable is its material aspect, i.e., the use of punctuation, the spelling, the division of the book into sections, the inscriptions on the pages, the presence (or absence) of illustrations. Taking as a starting point the presupposition that *Don Quixote* has always been and will eternally remain what it was when Cervantes first wrote it, Borges completely abolishes such infinite variations. This is a jump from reality into an impossible dream of a work that is always identical to itself.

Translated by Jernej Habjan

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