

BORGES AS COMEDIAN AS AUTHOR OF AUTHOR
OF THE *QUIXOTE*



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I find ample humor in that seemingly most seriously treated piece: "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*." It begins:

The *visible* work left by this novelist is easily and briefly enumerated. Unpardonable, therefore, are the omissions and additions perpetrated by Madame Henri Bachelier in a fallacious catalogue which a certain daily, whose *Protestant* tendency is no secret, has had the inconsideration to inflict upon its deplorable readers—though these be few and Calvinist, if not Masonic and circumcized. The true friends of Menard have viewed this catalogue with alarm and even with a certain melancholy. One might say that only yesterday we gathered before his final monument, amidst the lugubrious cypresses, and already Error tries to tarnish his Memory...

The tone is decidedly humorous. A paragraph written by a tire-some critic with cloistered cabal-fearing tendencies, as possibly envisaged by Nabokov (or even Henry James) in a moment of arch levity. The words employed: "perpetrated," "fallacious catalogue," "certain daily," "*Protestant* tendency," "inflict upon its deplorable readers," "these be few," "Calvinist, if not Masonic and circumcized" are humorous because of their elaborate circumlocution joined to an overweening tendentiousness. The covey of Protestant,

Masonic, and Jewish pretty well covers all the non-Catholic (as opposed to the clearly Catholic persuasion of the writer) bases. Error and Memory are personifications which are overblown and therefore humorous.

The next paragraph of "Menard" contains a *Remembrance of Things Past* affinity for titles. One of these is presented with obvious humor. "The Countess de Bagnoregio, one of the most delicate spirits of the Principality of Monaco (and now of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania," — a joinder of places worthy again of Nabokov in an impish mood and particularly since it seems to reverse the hagira of a certain ex-American become Monacon royalty (given the substitution of Pittsburgh for Philadelphia to avoid over obviousness) — "following her recent marriage to the international philanthropist Simon Kautzsch, who has been so inconsiderately slandered, alas! by the victims of his disinterested manoeuvres..." A panache of irony.

The items thereafter enumerated in Menard's "personal files" present an arpeggio of abstruseness whose total effect can be read as humorous, especially given the pedantry of their subject matter. Some of the items themselves are gently risible, such as p) and s):

p) An invective against Paul Valéry, in the *Papers for the Suppression of Reality* [amusing title] of Jacques Reboul. (This invective, we might say parenthetically, is the exact opposite of his true opinion of Valéry. The latter understood it as such and their old friendship was not endangered.)

s) A manuscript list of verses which owe their efficacy to their punctuation. [Humorous to most practitioners of poetry for stressing the minimal at the expense of the maximum.]

Whether the enumerated references are accurate or not is irrelevant. As the author states near the end of the story, Menard's technique of attribution has enriched the act of reading. And, perhaps, of writing.

The author in the narrative about the author of the *Quixote* displays his ironically humorous hand in a footnote:

I also had the secondary intention of sketching a personal portrait of Pierre Menard. But how could I dare to compete with the golden

pages which, I am told, the Baroness de Bacourt is preparing or with the delicate and punctual pencil of Carolus Hourcade?

A nice touch for bitchy humor.

Thereafter we are firmly concerned with the *Quixote* (of Menard) itself. His described methodology of writing it is not without humor:

Know Spanish well, recover the Catholic faith, fight against the Moors or the Turk, forget the history of Europe between the years 1602 and 1918, *be* Miguel de Cervantes.

This ascending catalogue of Alazonic tasks culminates in the impossible (since it is not mere metaphor). Menard, we are told, discards this procedure as too *easy*! It is not only, we are told, an impossible method, but is, in addition, not worth attaining: "To be, in the twentieth century, a popular novelist of the seventeenth seemed to him [Menard] a diminution." The balloon is punctured, the explosion of the joke occurs. Bergson is vindicated. Better, Menard decides "to go on being Pierre Menard and reach the *Quixote* through the experiences of Pierre Menard." A kind of buffoonery here, Menard as Bomolochus, almost as if Sancho Panza is substituted for Don Quixote. Menard is not without possession of a sense-of-humor: "My undertaking is not difficult, essentially, I should only have to be immortal to carry it out."

But of course the sly humor is that of the original *Quixote* (Cervantes) appearing as if Menard wrote it. The author confirms that "while leafing through Chapter XXVI—never essayed by him—I recognized our friend's style and something of his voice in this exceptional phrase: 'the river nymphs and the dolorous and humid Echo.'" which recalls a discussion the two had one afternoon. It is as if Cervantes wrote Menard, which is even droll. In this Borges does Nabokov's theme of *Pale fire* one better. Not mere comment on a written work about oneself but rewriting (while not rewriting) the original work which is, in reality, one's own. The ultimate palimpsest!

There is also humor of style. The author inquires:

But why precisely the *Quixote*? our reader will ask. Such a preference, in a Spaniard, would not have been inexplicable; but it is, no

doubt, in a Symbolist from Nîmes, essentially a devotee of Poe, who engendered Baudelaire, who engendered Mallarmé, who engendered Valéry, who engendered Edmond Teste.

More “begots” than a biblical portion interpreted by Woody Allen.

Then, we learn despite all his efforts, Menard decides (albeit tongue-in-cheek perhaps) that “the *Quixote* is unnecessary.” After all the contemplations of his methodology an alter-or-same ego shaggy-dog conclusion. (Perhaps a case of the tale wagging the dogma.) Nevertheless Menard perseveres. At reconstructing literally Cervantes’ spontaneous work. The oxymoron is amusing. The task is not easy because Menard is faced with two polar laws: “The first permits me to essay variations of a formal or psychological type; the second obliges me to sacrifice these variations to the ‘original’ text and reason out this annihilation in an irrefutable manner”. Making him a kind of literary Sisyphus. If these problems are not enough, the most vexing is the already existence of the *Quixote* itself. Maybe Menard should bring in Ionesco to deal with the absurdities faced. But he doesn’t have to. *His Quixote*, although fragmentary, “is more subtle than Cervantes’”. No matter that it is the same. It is and yet it isn’t, which is the point of the story. And Menard succeeds (I think) in spite of “his resigned or ironical habit of propagating ideas which were the strict reverse of those he preferred.” The proof of his triumph: the author assures us that “Cervantes’s text and Menard’s are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer.”

But the humor (again, my variant reading) culminates in the comparison between Menard’s *Don Quixote* and Cervantes’. Cervantes wrote:

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 counsellor.

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 counsellor.

If this is not enough, we are told: "History, the *mother* of truth: the idea is astounding." One is tempted to add: only an innovator such as Menard could have pulled it off while escaping the trap of mimesis. And, as the author points out, the "contrast in style is also vivid." I understand: Borges is making the valid point that a seemingly identical text read at a different period or even the same period by an individual reader is not the same as the original. Nonetheless, *my* reading of the story and (who knows?) of the *Quixote* itself is humorous. After all, the *Quixote*, Menard told the author, "was, above all, an entertaining book." So, I might add, was the *Quixote*.

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