

BORGES' REVISIONING OF READING
IN "PIERRE MENARD, AUTHOR OF THE QUIXOTE"



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In much of his work Borges cultivates the idea that what is about to be related is at best the product of successive attempts to make sense of circumstances whose retelling is subject to the whimsies of memory and personal inclinations to interpret the truth. "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," one of Borges' most well known stories, through just such a narration has implications for a wide variety of concerns relating to the way we view texts, and how we see and perceive the universe; it is a deeply profound revisioning of how meaning is created through the interaction of man and text. Through Menard's recreation of the *Quixote* in a different time and place from Cervantes' original, Borges implies the simple yet disturbing supposition that the meaning of literary works is entirely dependent on the varying historical and social contexts in which they are read. Simple because it seems obvious that context plays an enormous part in the determination of meaning of texts; complex and disturbing in its suggestion that literary meaning is constructed through mental processes irrevocably tied to location and period.

This idea as it relates to Borges' "Pierre Menard" has been explored by several others writing on Borges. In an interesting article

Oscar Tacca deals with the question of possible influences on Borges' use of the idea of reinterpreting literary works radically differently from generation to generation, and convincingly demonstrates (drawing from an earlier article by Columbian critic Rafael Gutiérrez Girardot) that it is at least feasible that Borges took this idea from readings of the French Symbolist poet Paul Valéry.¹ What is interesting about this is that Tacca shows that ideas similar to those expressed in "Pierre Menard" were "in the air" around the time Borges finished the story in 1939 in Nîmes. Silvia Dapía points out that Hans Robert Jauss recognized that with "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," Borges "anticipated (in 1939) the shift from the classical aesthetic production to the modern aesthetic production which took place in the 1960's" (Dapía 100; Jauss "Theory" 67).² Similarly, Erick Felinto writes that for Borges in "Pierre Menard,"

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 hermeneu-

¹ Tacca quotes from "Au sujet d'Adonis," dated 1920, in which Valéry writes "et donc le changement d'époque, qui es un changement de lecteur, est comparable à un changement dans le texte même, changement toujours imprévu, et incalculable.... Réjouissons-nous de pouvoir encore lire *Adonis*, et presque tout avec délices; mais ne pensons pas que nous lisons celui-même des contemporains de l'auteur. Ce qu'ils priaient le plus, peut-être nous échappe-t-il; ce qu'ils regardaient à peine nous touche quelquefois étrangement" (318) ("and thus a change of époque, which is a change of reader, is comparable to a change in the text itself, a change always unforeseen, and incalculable.... Let us rejoice at being able to reread [La Fontaine's] *Adonis*, and nearly always with pleasure: but let us not think that we would read it the same as the author's contemporaries. That which they found the most interesting, perhaps entirely escapes us; that which they scarcely saw sometimes affects us most strangely.") Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

² Dapía further notes that while Jauss, drawing from the hermeneutic theory of Hans Gadamer, "rejects the thesis of an atemporal, universal absolute meaning of a literary text" and "stresses the role of the reader" (Dapía 100; Jauss "Literary" 14) who engages texts that participate in an "endless dialogue between past and present, since the present cultural horizon of the reader will always influence the way a past literary work is understood" (Dapía 100; Jauss "Theory" 67-68), that "Menard's attitude is more radical than that of Jauss [since] while Jauss argues for a *fusion of horizons* where the text's historical and cultural horizon is embraced by the reader's horizon (Jauss *Literaturgeschichte* 132), Menard, by attributing the text to different writers and by placing it in different contexts, opens the way to an *infinite* number of *Quixotes*" (Dapía 101; here Dapía paraphrases Hayles 139).

tic 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)³

Others have explored Borges' role as an early exponent of post-modern ideas and his connections to theorists such as Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, and Baudrillard, who, it now seems likely, were influenced by Borges' new ways of thinking about the acts of reading and writing.⁴ What also seems clear is that Borges, in the 1920s and 1930s, was thinking in ways that were to become current more than thirty years later as the Modernist paradigm shifted to postmodern ways of thinking (F. de Toro 117). One particularly interesting insight is that with the irrevocable severing of the link between signifier and signified as postulated by Derrida and others (and earlier suggested by Borges) the door becomes open for a kind of writing where identical texts can mean different things since they are, even if literally the same word for word, never the same or identical to themselves (F. de Toro 121). This situation, as suggested by Fernando de Toro, leads to a scenario made explicit in Borges where "the chain of signifiers does not lead ... to the unpacking and discovery of [a] master signifier," but rather "leads ... towards an enactment of the sign without referent" (125), a state of affairs Derrida was later to elaborate. In the end, the difference between signifier and signified is collapsed, resulting in a "floating" system of signifiers with no provable connection to the "thing itself," an element of being permanently hidden from perception through language (See Derrida 49-50).

Yet another approach to Borges' revisioning of reading and writing is seen in the suggestion that Borges essentially dealt a death knell to the longstanding idea of literature as *mimesis*, that is mime-

³ "la colaboración del lector cobra más importancia que la del lector, ya que es tarea del primero realizar el movimiento hermenéutico que conduce a la actualización del texto.... El sentido del texto no preexiste al acto hermenéutico, sino que se constituye en el proceso mismo. Cada lectura actualiza determinadas potencialidades latentes del texto."

⁴ See F. de Toro.

sis of reality, in favor of a “‘literary mimesis,’ understood as a game with literary references, within a network of relations that at first appears as intertextuality” (A. de Toro 135; see also Cascardi). Alfonso de Toro points out that Borges’ view of reading and writing in “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” is very similar to the position Roland Barthes later sets out in *S/Z*, where “both reading and writing are placed in a relation of equivalence by transforming the reading into *re-writing*,” which in turn leads to an “eternal present” (see Barthes 11-12). A. De Toro’s key point here is that without any clearly identifiable “referent,” texts, including Cervantes’ and Menard’s identical *Quixotes*, refer only to themselves (i.e., they are “closed” systems), and therefore, though verbally identical can have very different meanings (136). The result of all this, according to de Toro, is that each rereading is “an *Urtext*, an origin, and consequently ... endless origins, and at the same time none,” allegedly the same theory of literary practice suggested by Barthes in *S/Z* (137).

A. De Toro’s reference here to the creation of an *Urtext* is something I will take up later in this paper, though in a slightly different context, that of Borges’ hint at the Plotinian idea that “everything is everything” in relation to Menard’s project of recreating Cervantes’ *Quixote*. As I will later argue, the idea of “access” to a timeless version of Cervantes’ work is more central to Menard’s project, I believe, than is recognized by de Toro. De Toro, however, hints at the importance of this idea when he writes, referring to Borges’ “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” that

to “reproduce” the encyclopedia of Tlön would amount to rewriting its 1001 pages, an unnecessary task since its identical copy would acquire another meaning, as demonstrated in “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” which obliterates the origin, and it imposes itself as the first text.... Instead, he creates a fourth book (the text ‘BEYOND,’ where all the versions exist simultaneously with their contradictions....) (143).⁵

⁵ Of course appeal to a “Platonic” or “Plotinian” explanation of Menard’s project is not universally accepted. See Jorge J. E. Gracia for a contrary take on the idea of an existence of texts in a world of Forms (99-100).

In this paper I focus mainly on Borges' "Pierre Menard" as a text that changes the way we view texts and not much on the issue of whether it is plausible, or even possible that Menard could have actually reproduced an exact replica of a portion of Cervantes' *Quixote*. To the extent that I deal with this issue, one that others have written on, I argue that to focus on whether it is "realistic" to imagine Menard or for that matter anyone reproducing a text exactly without merely copying it is to miss the point of Borges' story, which is not primarily concerned with whether Menard is capable of reproducing the *Quixote*, but rather with simply assuming the existence of such a text. Borges, in other words, assumes the existence of some fragments of Menard's *Quixote* (which may or may not be plausible), then derives certain possible consequences from the existence of this text. This procedure may seem somewhat strange in the world of literary criticism, but is not at all in the realm of scientific theorizing, which regularly uses hypotheticals to allow for thinking about possible outcomes for various starting conditions. My point is that it is not particularly relevant whether Menard could actually do what the story says he does, but rather that the mere positing of the existence of such a text prompts some very interesting speculations about the act of interpretation.⁶

Humorous or preposterous as Menard's enterprise is, however, it functions as a metaphor for the modern drive to construct meaning, and our obsessive quest for the absolute in a framework where familiar moral, spiritual, religious, psychological, and ontological guideposts have seemingly vanished.⁷ Curiously, the impetus for Menard's project, Borges implies, lies in a notion that Borges entertains in much of his work, that in some mysterious manner every-

⁶ For discussions of the feasibility of Menard writing the *Quixote* or whether the concept makes any sense at all, see Wreen, Woof and Aguilar. These discussions, while philosophically interesting, are not central, I believe, to the core concern of the text, that of revisioning the act of reading.

⁷ See Lefkowitz and Wreen for discussions of Borges' satiric intentions in "Pierre Menard." Both Wreen and Lefkowitz seem to imply that "Pierre Menard" is nothing more than an elaborate and well-constructed piece of humor. My contention is that Borges' mischievous wit and his raising of serious points about the project of literary interpretation are by no means mutually exclusive.

thing (and thus everyone) is everything, and so Menard, theoretically at least, should have access to the original *Quixote*. Yet the problem, and the crux of Menard's dilemma, is not the positing of this interesting idea with a long history, but rather how to deal with this concept in a non-trivial manner, for after all, as narrator Borges points out, facile attempts to work out the implications of this idea result in foolish scenarios such as "Christ on a boulevard,... or Don Quixote on Wall Street."⁸ Similarly, Novalis' "*total identification* with a chosen author,"⁹ is rejected by Menard for the simple reason that such a literary/philosophical fiction would merely objectify the trivial case of a man *imagining* himself to be another, without in fact being that person.

The problem Borges grapples with here is a philosophical one: is the same thing (idea, object, situation) in a different time and place the same as itself or is it different? And is a thing's meaning the same or different than that in the original situation? The provisional answer Borges appears to arrive at is that it is "context" that determines whether something that appears in a different time and place from its original is identical to itself. For the purposes of interpretation Cervantes' and Menard's *Quixotes* are both identical and different. Deborah Knight and William Irwin, both argue that from a philosophical point of view, identical texts can plausibly have entirely different meanings. Knight, drawing from the work of philosopher Arthur C. Danto, suggests that while from the Leibnizian perspective of "indiscernibles" Menard's and Cervantes' *Quixotes* must be identical and thus have the same properties (i.e., including the same literary meaning), according to Danto they do not in fact have the same properties and so cannot be identical, since they "have only in common those properties that the eye as such might identify [and thus] Borges's example [in "Pierre Menard"] has the philosophical effect of forcing us to avert our eye from the surface of things, and to ask in what if not surfaces the differences between distinct works must consist" (qtd. in Knight 16). Similarly, Irwin argues that two "indiscernible" texts might indeed *not* be the same text. He writes,

⁸ "Cristo en un bulevar ... o don Quijote en Wall Street" (OC 446).

⁹ "la *total identificación* con un autor determinado" (OC 446).

"Clearly, this happens all the time with simple texts . . . , [s]o logically speaking this could occur for larger and more complex texts as well" (39).¹⁰

The problem posed by the existence of Menard's *Quixote* is best understood in the context of marginal works of literature such the epic of *Gilgamesh*, whose cultural and historical context are unknown or only dimly understood. In trying to make sense of such works the interpreter is forced to realize the predominant role our own context, culture, and history play in the deciphering of a piece of literature, something we may fool ourselves into believing is not the case. Menard's *Quixote* forces upon us a "thought experiment" of trying to imagine what it would be like to "decode" a work of literature without the support of information regarding the cultural milieu of the work's creation, a situation that is simulated in modern analysis of *Gilgamesh* and other works from remote antiquity, but also more familiar works such as the Hebrew Bible, where specialists admit the existence of many words and phrases whose meaning are at best unclear. Menard's *Quixote* forces us to imagine having to admit that meaning is entirely dependent on context, an "accidental" aspect of the work, —accidental in terms of what we know regarding the genesis of the work, as well as the peculiarities of the times we live in. Borges, in many ways, suggests we know nothing about the genesis of a work to a surety, yet oddly it is this very lack of surety that suggests to Borges the way works of literature acquire their meaning. Menard in a sense, sets out to create a work without a context, which is to say, a work that can be all things to all people.

Strangely the solution to this problem seems to be an idea that Borges has expressed reservations about, but yet continued to be attracted to throughout his life, that of access to a realm of Forms that can provide Menard with a pre-existing "version" of the *Quixote*, and that mysteriously allows Menard to recreate what Cervantes

¹⁰ The example Irwin uses is "big furniture sale" (39), which can be interpreted in at least two distinct ways. See also Silvia Dapía's interesting discussion of this matter in the context of Marcel Duchamp's "ready-made" objects. Dapía also mentions Floyd Merrell, Gilles Deleuze and Robert Jauss as others who consider the "paradox of non-identity" in the context of Borges' "Pierre Menard." See Merrell 184-185, Deleuze 5, and Jauss's "The Theory" 67.

has already made. Yet 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, something similar to Alfonso de Toro's *Urtext*. The original *Quixote*, while having been "discovered" by Cervantes, nevertheless rests (and continues to rest) in the realm of forms waiting to be created or discovered by another. Menard therefore tacitly denies that he is the creator of the second *Quixote*, but rather that he is simply uncovering something that is under the correct circumstances necessary, even inevitable. Menard, in effect, argues that the point of destination of his astonishing project (the creation of another *Quixote*) is, rather than impossible, essentially a forgone conclusion, no less certain than "[t]he final term of a metaphysical or theological demonstration."¹¹

It's worth quoting narrator Borges' entire paragraph here:

"My proposal is merely astonishing," he [Menard] wrote me the 30th of September of 1934, from Bayonne. "The final term of a metaphysical or theological demonstration –the external world, God, chance, universal Forms –is no more sure, no more uncommon than my revealed novel. The only difference is that philosophers publish in agreeable volumes the intermediate steps of their work, while I conceal mine". In effect, there is not a single draft to attest to these years of work.¹²

Borges' specific mention of "universal Forms" in this passage evokes the timeless Platonic world, where the *Quixote* exists, available for Menard or anyone else to draw upon and create anew. While Borges and others have pointed out the many philosophical and conceptual difficulties with the concept of eternal Forms, the idea remains an astonishingly durable one, manifesting in various

¹¹ "El término final de una demostración teológica o metafísica" (OC 447).

¹² "Mi propósito es meramente asombroso' me escribió el 30 de setiembre de 1934 desde Bayonne. 'El término final de una demostración teológica o metafísica –el mundo externo, Dios, la casualidad, las formas universales – no es menos anterior y común que mi divulgada novella. La sola diferencia es que los filósofos publican en agradables volúmenes las etapas intermediarias de su labor y yo he resuelto perderlas'. En efecto, no queda un solo borrador que atestigüe ese trabajo de años" (OC 447).

ways throughout Western intellectual history. Examples of Borges' appeal to the idea of an archetypal realm of "patterns" (including particular ideas) that repeat throughout history are found throughout Borges' works. Borges' expression of this idea varies, but common to all these expressions seems to be the thought that everyone, theoretically at least, has access to or may unknowingly act out these patterns (because they ultimately reside outside of the individual), which can be seen in identifiable repeated forms (similar to Jungian archetypes) down through the recorded history of the world.¹³

Near the end of "Pierre Menard" we read, in the words of Menard, "Every man should be capable of all ideas and I believe that in the future he will be."¹⁴ The clearest statement of just how this might be possible is found in "La flor de Coleridge," where we read,

Around 1938, Paul Valéry wrote: "The History of literature must not be the history of authors and the accidents of their careers or the careers of their works, but rather the History of the Spirit as producer and consumer of literature. That literature could be written without mentioning a single writer." This was not the first time the Spirit made this observation; in 1844, in Concord, Massachusetts, another of its scribes had noted: "I am very much struck in literature by the appearance, that one person wrote all the books ... there is such equality and identity both of judgment and point of view in the narrative, that it is plainly the work of one all-seeing, all-hearing gentleman" (Emerson, *Essays: Second Series*, "Nominalist and Realist," 1844). Twenty years before, Shelley expressed the opinion that all the

¹³ See, for instance, in *Historia de la eternidad* (1936), "Historia de la eternidad," "La doctrina de los ciclos," "El tiempo circular," in *Otras inquisiciones*, "La flor de Coleridge," "El sueño de Coleridge," "Valéry como símbolo," "El ruiseñor de Keats," "El espejo de los enigmas," in *El hacedor*, "Una rosa amarilla," "Paradiso, XXXI, 108," "Everything and nothing," and "In memoriam J. F. K."

¹⁴ "Todo hombre debe ser capaz de todas las ideas y entiendo que en el provenir lo será" (OC 450).

poems of the past, the present and future, are episodes or fragments of a single infinite poem, written by all the poets of earth.¹⁵

Yet why, we might wonder, is so much work required to uncover something that already exists, albeit in another realm? The answer may be simply that there are many things that exist but yet which are not easily accessible. In fact, it might be argued that the majority of things we accept as part of our everyday world were not obvious until they were discovered or created, cars or skyscrapers, for instance. Menard's *Quixote*, is as obvious as, say, the clothes we wear or the food we eat, but yet in the case of the *Quixote*, admittedly harder, though not impossible to uncover.

Borges' mixing of facetious argumentation with serious material is seen perhaps most clearly in Menard's manner of preparing to write the second *Quixote*, which nevertheless brings to light key philosophical concerns that have characterized modern thought. As a metaphor this strange process Menard undertakes makes considerable sense when viewed in the context of the activity of interpretation, though the message turns out to be rather subversive. The perspective Borges attacks is what passes as the commonsensical position that what we are required to do when attempting to make sense of literature or history, is to *put ourselves in the place of those we are investigating*, or imagine ourselves as part of the world we are reading about. It might seem, for instance, natural to try to understand the happenings in a novel whose actions and characters live in 5th century Greece by *becoming* the people we are reading about. Yet for Borges, this is impossible, and is rejected by Menard. Borges ex-

¹⁵ "Hacia 1938, Paul Valéry escribió: 'La Historia de la literatura no debería ser la historia de los autores y de los accidentes de su carrera o de la carrera de sus obras sino la Historia del Espíritu como productor o consumidor de literatura. Esa historia podría llevarse a término sin mencionar un solo escritor.' No era la primera vez que el Espíritu formulaba esa observación; en 1844, en el pueblo de Concord, otro de sus amanuenses había anotado: 'Diríase que una sola persona ha redactado cuantos libros hay en el mundo; tal unidad central hay en ellos que es innegable que son obra de un caballero omnisciente' (Emerson: *Essays*, 2, VIII). Viente años antes, Shelley dictaminó que todos los poemas del pasado, del presente y del porvenir, son episodios o fragmentos de un solo poema infinito, erguido por todos los poetas del orbe (*A Defense of Poetry*, 1821)" (OC 639).

presses this in a slightly different way, suggesting that for Menard, *being* Cervantes and creating the *Quixote* would not only be *impossible*, but *uninteresting*, which is another way of saying that the project of trying to project ourselves into an earlier era (in the case of Menard, into the time of Cervantes) is a waste of time, an activity Borges ironically labels as "relatively simple," for to become Cervantes Menard merely needed to "[k]now Spanish well, adopt the Catholic faith, fight against the Moors or Turks, forget the history of Europe between the years 1602 and 1918, *be* Miguel de Cervantes."¹⁶ In Borges' ironic manner,

[t]o be a popular seventeenth century novelist in the twentieth century seemed to [Menard] a diminution. To be, in some way, Cervantes, and arrive at the *Quixote* seemed less difficult –and therefore less interesting – than to continue being Pierre Menard and arrive at the *Quixote* through the experiences of Menard.¹⁷

Borges' point here is that what is truly interesting (and really the only thing possible) is to try to understand works of literature from our own times, and not waste time with the banal fiction that we can gain a better appreciation of literature by learning everything there is to know about Cervantes' Spain or Shakespeare's England.¹⁸ Borges argues against the simple and generally accepted idea that one

¹⁶ [c]onocer bien el español, recuperar la fe católica, guerrear contra los moros o contra el turco, olvidar la historia de Europa entre los años de 1602 y de 1918, *ser* Miguel de Cervantes" (OC 447).

¹⁷ "Ser en el siglo veinte un novelista popular del siglo diecisiete le pareció una disminución. Ser, de alguna manera, Cervantes, y llegar al Quijote le pareció menos arduo –por consiguiente, menos interesante– que seguir siendo Pierre Menard y llegar al Quijote, a través de las experiencias de Pierre Menard" (OC 447).

¹⁸ In Borges' review of Jean Marie Matthias Philippe Augustus (1838-1899), Count of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's *The Guest at the Last Banquets* we read "Where can a poet go, through the excess that is his imagination, to escape his own time and place? It is obvious that the Verona of Romeo and Juliet is not exactly situated in Italy, that the magical sea of the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is the magnificent dream of an English poet at the end of the eighteenth century, and not the sea of Conrad or the sea of Homer. Will I someday perhaps write a poem that does not take place in Buenos Aires? The same occurred in Villiers with Spain and the Orient: they are as French as Flaubert's laborious *Salammbô*" (Weinberger 506).

needs to somehow project oneself into the reality of what one is describing or attempting to visualize in order to get a reasonable idea of the “form of life” one is dealing with;¹⁹ Borges, however, is not rejecting the idea that it is helpful to gather conceptual and contextual information regarding what one is reading, but rather suggesting the impossibility of truly projecting oneself into alien worlds in any definitive or authoritative way. Borges, in short, makes a statement regarding the status of what we know and don’t know about the world; from Borges’ perspective, it is presumptuous and ultimately foolish to imagine that we can truly understand a work of literature or a historical period from the perspective of the time period itself, for in the end our efforts necessarily run up against an epistemological wall, since this is simply the nature of reality.

Ironically, this realization allows Borges to read sections of the original *Quixote* as if they had been written by Menard (“Some nights ago, while leafing through Chapter XXVI –never attempted by Menard– I recognized the style of our friend....”).²⁰ One now imagines works of literature deliberately read out of context, or perhaps subject to interpretation where knowledge of the original context of the work is limited or unknown altogether. One imagines, for

¹⁹ In an intriguing similarity between Wittgenstein’s conception of “forms of life” in his *Philosophical Investigations*, an idea related to “language games,” and Borges’ position on the impossibility of critiquing literature from any perspective other than our own, Wittgenstein argued that for statements (this would include critical positions or judgments of any sort) to be meaningful they had to be subject in principle to public standards of correctness, and that “the signs in language can only function when there is a possibility of judging the correctness of their use” (Biletzki); according to Wittgenstein “... the term ‘language game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (Wittgenstein 11, qtd. in Biletzki). “Forms of life can be understood as changing and contingent, dependent on culture, context, history, etc....” (Biletzki). Both Borges’ and Wittgenstein’s positions suggest that, for better or worse, we have only our “lived” way of life (what is culturally and practically available to us) to use in making sense of language, and that in any case, language (and for Borges this certainly includes literature) cannot be understood except through the our own times. For more on similarities in Borges’ and Wittgenstein’ conception of language, see Muallem “Borges and Wittgenstein” and “What Can Be Shown”. See also Marinho.

²⁰ Noches pasadas, al hojear el capítulo XXVI –no ensayado nunca por él– reconocí el estilo de nuestro amigo....” (OC 447).

instance, attempting to make sense of ancient Egyptian devotional poems from the third millennium B.C., when all that is found with these poems are some grave goods vaguely hinting at the ceremonies that might have accompanied the burial. Yet what Borges proposes to do with the *Quixote* is in some considerable way what is already done in the interpretive process. In other words, we really don't know much about the original context; in actual fact, we know so little to a point of certainty that a work we are critiquing could, practically speaking, have been written by anyone. The proof of this, as Borges suggests, is to simply critique/analyze a work out of its known (or presumed, ie., constructed) context, the result being that we must inevitably, in order to make sense of the work, construct another plausible context which to use as an interpretive framework. The result is that all plausible (or implausible) contexts yield potentially interesting results. And, Borges suggests, since literary analysis is not really about truth, what is more interesting is the provocative or surprising nature of what is yielded by a literary investigation; or rather, if one insists on talking about truth, we must limit ourselves to apparent truth within a context.

The positive aspect of what Borges suggests in depicting Menard's enterprise is that by bringing to the foreground the contextual dependency of the interpretive process we gain, admittedly by ceding some claim to objective truth, a considerably greater range of interpretive latitude; the problem, however, Borges implies, is that one never quite knows which interpretations are sound and which are not, especially if one's judgment of such matters is based primarily on aesthetic and logical concerns. One of the oddest implications of Borges' musings here is the idea that rather than enriching our understanding of a work of literature, contextual information serves to limit the range of interpretation. The contextual frame, simply stated, limits the range and scope of what we can say about a piece of literature, about its meaning, about its relation to our lives and thought. Strangely, however, the fact that the creation of a work of literature is tied to a particular time, place, and set of historical and social circumstances, is the very reason that the recreation of a text in another time and place results in an entirely different work. To the extent, then, that we *are* inevitably tied to the cultural and ac-

cidental circumstances surrounding the production of a piece of literature, we must admit that the *figurative or actual* recreation of the *Quixote* would result in a radically new work.²¹

Yet more interesting is Borges' suggestion that rather than attempting to recover the "true" contextual circumstances around which a work was created, we should give ourselves free reign to investigate the vast array of connections that can be made by "updating" a work, i.e., *rewriting* it, figuratively speaking, in each successive age. To unlock the full potential of Cervantes' work we need, Borges suggests, to willfully ignore the original context of the work. There are various ways to read a text, and one way is ahistorically,²² while another legitimate way is to situate texts in their socio-historical context. But most importantly for Borges, the latter approach certainly does not reveal truer information about what the text means, for texts are both situated in history and out of it, per-

²¹ Yet another late twentieth century literary critical resonance that echoes Borges' ideas on reading and writing are the views of Stanley Fish, whose work falls under the reader- response rubric, and who has argued for the participation of the reader in the creation of meaning. In his early essay "What is Stylistics and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?" (1973), Fish contends that even aspects such as aesthetic and stylistic considerations of a text only gain meaning in regard to "the shape of the reader's experience" (131), and that meaning "is not the property of a timeless formalism, but something acquired in the context of an activity" (140). In his influential volume *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (1980), Fish writes that "the act of recognizing literature is not constrained by something in the text, nor does it issue from an independent and arbitrary will; rather, it proceeds from a collective decision as to what will count as literature, a decision that will be in force only so long as a community of readers and writers or believers continues to abide by it" (11). In other words, the meaning of texts, as Borges suggests in "Pierre Menard," is the result of decisions made by interpretive communities (made up of individuals, of course), which change over time. Norman N. Holland observes that while the post-modern sensibility, which has seen the rise of reader-oriented theories of reading, seems to "cap the general growth of relativism in our century" (1207), we nevertheless cannot respond to literature "except through our own or somebody else's perception, and that perception is colored by one's personality, culture, education, history, dreaming, and so on" (1208), a position generally indicative of the epistemological skepticism, distrust of system, and resistance to historicity Borges shares with the likes of the theorists, philosophers, and writers such as Beckett, Adorno, Iser, and Derrida (Schwab 85-86).

²² Borges discusses this in some of his essays, as if all works were written by one timeless author.

haps the way we speak of persons as having a body and a soul—both are real, yet they are very different things governed by different rules. Borges is most interested in the *soul* of books, not the time-bound, accidental specifics surrounding their composition; and this *soul* has the curious capacity to proliferate in meaning through the passage of time—or perhaps it is correct to say that for Borges, not all books have souls, i.e., are timeless (some books become poorer with age), but that those that are timeless take on a life of their own that bears less and less connection to the specifics of the time, place, and social circumstances of their creation. The *Quixote*, perhaps, is such a book. For such a book, Borges suggests, anything is possible; for Borges, this is simply the way things are, though we want to believe that time and place are sacrosanct and must be taken into account in uncovering the “true” meaning of a text (Few if any New Critics, for example, counseled the complete irrelevance of context). But for Borges texts mean many things to many people, and while some interpretations may seem nonsensical, only time (if anything at all) will determine whether they have value. Needless to say, textual interpretations have widely varying receptions in different cultures, and even in the same culture over time, and what may count as legitimate commentary in one place or at one time, may be incomprehensible in another, or simply seem to be patent nonsense.

Borges is wary of the seriousness that characterizes the literary critical enterprise, and wary also of any attempt to limit the meaning of texts based on arbitrary constraints that are merely the agreed upon conventions of a particular time and place. He seems to be saying, simply, that in reading the *Quixote*, or Menard's *Quixote*, that while perhaps all interpretations are not likely, the possibilities are vast and possibly infinite. What one sees in a literary text is simply what ones sees, given a particular assumed context, and there are limitless contextual frames. Menard, in Chapter XXXVIII of Part I, Borges tells us, wisely, as a modern writer, “avoids com[ing] down against letters and in favor of arms,”²³ whereas from “Cervantes ... an old soldier ... this judgment is explainable.”²⁴ Other critics see

²³ “falla el pleito contra las letras y en favor de las armas” (OC 449).

²⁴ “Cervantes ... un viejo militar: su fallo se explica” (OC 449).

other things, which are arguably *there* in the text: “Madame Bachelier has seen ... [a] subordination of the author to the psychology of the hero; others (lacking perspicacity) a *transcription* of the *Quixote*; the Baroness of Bacourt, the influence of Nietzsche.”²⁵ Borges suggests that we might superimpose one interpretation, or another, or yet another on the text, for we could equally well (and some will think this a type of literary perversion), add a fourth interpretation, Menard’s “resigned or ironic habit of putting forward ideas that were the exact opposite of those he himself believed.”²⁶ The point Borges is making here is where does one stop making alternate readings of a work of literature? No one, for instance, can say there are X number of legitimate readings of the *Quixote*, but not $X + 1$, or $X + 2$, or for that matter $x + n$ potentially legitimate readings of a text. $X + n$ readings means there is an indefinite, unknown, and probably unknowable number of possible legitimate readings, and that no one can know with certainty whether a reading is “legitimate” or not, since the very “interpretive community” that determines contextual frames also judges the acceptability of particular readings. The text, Borges concludes “of Cervantes and that of Menard are verbally identical, but the second is infinitely richer. (More ambiguous, say his detractors; but ambiguity is richness.)”²⁷ Nothing, Borges implies, is lost in viewing literature through the lens of multiplicity of perspectives,²⁸ and indeed much is gained in terms of the potential richness of the interpretive project and the subversion of received cultural and literary critical *idées fixes*.

²⁵ “Madame Bachelier ha visto en ellas una admirable y típica subordinación del autor a la psicología del héroe; otras (nada perspicazmente) una *transcripción* del Quijote; la baronesa de Bacourt, la influencia de Nietzsche” (OC 449).

²⁶ “hábito resignado o irónico de propagar ideas que eran el estricto reverso de la preferidas por él” (OC 449).

²⁷ “de Cervantes y el de Menard son verbalmente idénticos, pero el segundo es casi infinitamente más rico. (Más ambiguo, dirán sus detractores; pero la ambigüedad es una riqueza.)” (OC 449).

²⁸ Is it an accident that Borges chooses to mention Nietzsche? Nietzsche’s “perspectivalism,” acknowledged as a source of postmodern thought, and a position that seeks to make all viewpoints in theory equally valid, seems a likely influence on the position Borges takes regarding “truth” in “Pierre Menard.”

Borges' approach to certainty in literature is that whereas it is taken for granted that there are profound truths to be found, it's nevertheless assumed that to be too serious, too earnest in the search for truth has the effect of distancing one from that very truth.²⁹ So for Borges there are profound truths, but these truths are resistive to simple rational investigation, and not of the kind that we expect. These truths are simply not provable statements of fact, but rather complexly contingent assertions based upon a combination of reflection on the material in the text and what the reader brings to a series of readings. The interpretive possibilities are virtually infinite, and only by ruling out certain possibilities (which Borges does not generally wish to do) can we limit interpretive alternatives.³⁰

What follows is perhaps the most well known of the story's passages, and arguably the core of "Pierre Menard," where Borges tests the limits of his "theory" of "contextual indeterminacy." We read:

It is a revelation to compare Menard's *Don Quixote* with that of Cervantes. Cervantes, for example, wrote (Part I, Chapter IX):

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, storehouse of actions, witness of the past, example and advisor to the present, council to the future.

Written in the seventeenth century, written by the "ingenious layman" Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetoric elegy of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:

*... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, storehouse of actions, witness of the past, example and advisor to the present, council to the future.*³¹

²⁹ Cf. similarities between Borges' position and certain aspects of Buddhist thought. See my articles "Mystical Phenomenology of the Book in Borges" and "The Mystical Experience in Borges: A Problem of Perception."

³⁰ It is difficult to find anything in Borges that supports the idea of an absolute, unless it's simply the idea that ultimately the truth, if such a thing exists, is hidden from us by a veil (the nature of which is unclear) that we are unlikely ever to penetrate. Curiously, the closest Borges comes to acknowledging as having true and lasting meaning are values like love, friendship, and loyalty, which mostly reside outside the realm of intellectual proof (we see this in his poetry and some of his shorter pieces, such as in *El hacedor*). In the realm of the intellect, for Borges, there is no prescribed interpretation for anything.

³¹ Es una revelación cotejar el don Quijote de Menard con el de Cervantes. Éste, por ejemplo, escribió (Don Quijote, primera parte, noveno capítulo):

We might argue that if the juxtaposition of these two passages is legitimate, then virtually any interpretation of any text will be acceptable in some context. Here Borges sets forth, I suggest, his case for the radical indeterminacy of meaning, not to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that what he suggests is true, but rather simply to test his hypothesis. Borges issues a challenge to those who would insist that interpretation of texts must be bound by some set of universal standards or conglomeration of mutually-agreed-upon ways of thinking about what's acceptable or not in the realm of interpretation.

Yet while Borges surely argues the contingent nature of the literary critical enterprise, he wishes also to leave room for a heroic, even quixotic defiance of the very doctrine implied by Menard's project, that historical truth "is not what happened, but what we decide happened...."³² [that] [t]here is no intellectual exercise that is not, ultimately, meaningless."³³ Strangely, the meaning of these "nihilistic" musings may be precisely the opposite of what they seem, for Menard's attempts can be seen as a metaphor for humanity's perhaps doomed but immensely important work of recreating anew the past, another metaphor for literature/literary interpretation. Thus Menard's is the quixotic (heroic) project of interpretation and reinterpretation, ironically, the sum of which (all possible interpretations, i.e., the theoretical or ideal sum) is the closest human approximation to "truth". Ultimately, Menard is akin to the holy fool of Sufi and other religious traditions, who

[r]esolved to anticipate the vanity that awaits all the endeavors of mankind; [who] willingly took on an immensely complex project, futile from the start... [who] dedicated his scruples and long sleepless nights to reproducing in a foreign language a preexisting book... [whose] drafts were many... [who] tirelessly corrected and ripped

... 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 (OC 449).

³² "no es lo que sucedió; es lo que juzgamos que sucedió" (OC 449).

³³ "no hay ejercicio intelectual que no sea finalmente inútil" (OC 449).

up thousands of handwritten pages... [and who] would not permit anyone to examine them and made sure than none survived.³⁴

As is so often the case with Borges, he ends on a mildly hopeful note that echos his wish that perhaps all is not in vain, that the words of the sage in *Ecclesiastes* are not in their entirety true, that somewhere, somehow there is abiding meaning in the nature of things.

For Borges, the essence of what we are is creativity, invention, at our core beings with the capacity to renew not only literature but ourselves as well. Borges ends "Pierre Menard" in epiphanic (and humorous) fashion. Menard, we read, "has enriched the slow and rudimentary act of reading through a new technique: the technique of deliberate anachronism and erroneous attributions...."³⁵ We live in a world of infinite possibility, in a world where in some half tragic, half comic way, we are truly free in the realm of spirit, in thought, in aspirations, and yes, according to Menard, even free to hope that there is meaning to the crazy, seemingly meaningless maze of existence. And finally, through Menard, Borges suggests that the act of reading itself may have redemptive quality provided we do it honestly and bravely. Perhaps, just perhaps, reading is a portal through which can glimpse, or possibly even enter this world of freedom, a world that Menard and Borges have begun to explore.

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³⁴ "Resolvió adelantarse a la vanidad que aguarda todas las fatigas del hombre; acometió una empresa complejísima y de antemano fútil. Dedicó sus escrúpulos y viglias a repetir en un idioma ajeno un libro preexistente. Multiplicó sus borradores; corrigió tenazmente y desgarró miles de páginas manuscritas. No permitió que fueran examinadas por nadie y cuidó que no sobrevivieran" (OC 450).

³⁵ "ha enriquecido mediante una técnica nueva el arte detenido y rudimentario de la lectura: la técnica del anacronismo deliberado y de las atribuciones erróneas" (OC 450).

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