

Whose Words?

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Whose Words?:

Text and Authorship in *Pierre Menard, Autor del Quijote*

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The problem of how we link a text with its source—the meaning of authorship— is at the centre of Jorge Luis Borges’s story *Pierre Menard, Autor del Quijote*. The narrator of the story asserts confidently that Pierre Menard, a fictional author whose chief work was an exact, word-for-word recreation of portions of Cervantes’s *Don Quijote*, was a genius rather than a plagiarist, and the

story as a whole provides an intriguing and disconcerting rationale for that assertion. This article

argues that the story is profoundly troubling to

theories that invoke the author or other aspects of context to interpret a text, and for that reason useful as a probing tool into more recent conceptions of the relationship between author and reader, including but not limited to those of Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette. I will briefly recapitulate the elements of the story most relevant to the discussion of authorship before analysing the story’s implications for Barthes and Genette’s ideas and remarking upon Borges’s own attitude to the problems he has raised.

I

Pierre Menard, Autor del Quijote takes the form of a pseudo-essay written by an unnamed narrator, who aims to correct some misapprehensions regarding his recently deceased friend, the French writer Pierre Menard. The story includes a fascinating list of Menard’s publications, but the narrator maintains that his greatest work was unfinished and unpublished—“los capítulos noveno y trigésimo octavo de la

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primera parte del Don Quijote y ... un fragmento del capítulo veintidós"¹ (Borges 48-9).

He hastens to add that these pages were not copied; rather, Menard was imposing upon himself an extraordinarily strict and difficult form of composition: to write creatively and to some degree spontaneously in Spanish, but to discard all those compositions which did not correspond word-for-word with Cervantes' text, and in addition "razonar de un modo irrefutable esa aniquilación"² (Borges 52). Menard's first attempt involved trying to put himself into the precise mindset of Cervantes at the beginning of the seventeenth century: "El método inicial que imaginó era relativamente sencillo. Conocer 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"³ (Borges 52-3). But he soon lost interest in this approach, which was essentially to rewind history and then simply play it again: a process difficult to execute, but nonetheless empty of meaning. It would be, he believed, far more interesting to arrive at the same end through a completely different chain of circumstances: "Ser ... 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"⁴ (Borges 53). The first option

¹ "Chapters nine and thirty-eight of the first part of *Don Quijote* and a fragment of chapter twenty-two." Because of the sensitivity of the language involved, I have chosen to quote Borges in the original Spanish; I will include my own translations in footnotes. These translations owe a significant—sometimes word-for-word—debt to the New Directions edition of *Labyrinths*.

² "To justify in an irrefutable manner this annihilation."

³ "His initial intentions with regard to method were simple enough: to know Spanish well, to recapture the Catholic faith, to make war upon the Moors or the Turks, to forget the history of Europe between 1602 and 1918, to be Miguel de Cervantes."

⁴ "To be . . . Cervantes and to so compose the *Quijote* seemed to him less difficult—and so, less interesting—than to go on being Pierre Menard

would have involved becoming another author; the second preserves Menard's identity.

This is a crucial distinction, for it is precisely the difference in authors which allows the narrator to interpret two identical passages so differently a few pages later. For ease of reference—and because it is well worth re-reading—I reproduce the section here:

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.⁵ (Borges 54-55)

and to so compose the *Quijote*, by means of the experiences of Pierre Menard.”

⁵ “It is a revelation to place Menard's *Don Quijote* alongside Cervantes'. This latter, for example, wrote (*Don Quijote*, Part One, Chapter Nine): ‘...Truth, whose mother is history, that rival of time, that repository of deeds, witness to the past, example and warning to the present, adviser to the future.’

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This passage has set more than one head spinning. It implies that the meaning of a given passage—and we may easily extend this arbitrarily down to a single word or up to an entire novel or literature—is determined by its context (of which the author is a key part), and not by the passage or word itself. Howard Giskin phrases it well: “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” (103). Strikingly, in this view authorship has very little to do with the actual words written on the actual page, since these may, by design or chance, be identical to words written by some other author at some other time; authorship has to do instead with some intangible, perhaps metaphysical identity behind the words.

There is a mysticism in this conception of authorship that many readers will find uncomfortable, as Borges no doubt intended. It seems absurd to agree with the narrator of *Pierre Menard* that the essence or identity of Menard somehow seeps through the same words as Cervantes used. Just in case any readers do reconcile themselves to this ghostly presence, however, Borges piles problem on top of problem. His narrator first claims to sense hints of Menard even in parts of *Don Quijote* that he knows Menard never replicated:

Written in the seventeenth century, written by the “untutored genius” Cervantes, this list is a mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:

‘...Truth, whose mother is history, that rival of time, that repository of deeds, witness to the past, example and warning to the present, adviser to the future.’

History, the *mother* of truth: the idea is astonishing. Menard, a contemporary of William James, defines history not as an inquiry after reality but as its origin. True history, according to him, is not that which has happened: it is that which we believe to have happened. The final clauses—‘example and warning to the present, adviser to the future’—are brazenly pragmatic.”

Noches pasadas, al hojear el capítulo XXVI—no ensayado nunca por él [Menard]—reconocí el estilo de nuestro amigo y como su voz en esta frase excepcional: *las ninfas de los ríos, la dolorosa y húmida Eco*. Esa conjunción eficaz de un adjetivo moral y otro físico me trajo a la memoria un verso de Shakespeare, que discutimos una tarde.⁶ (Borges 53-4)

He then, in the last paragraph of the story, vastly expands the range of this type of interpretation—as he views it, an enriching of all literature: for, he says, if it is legitimate to interpret words that Cervantes happened to have written as coming from Menard, then why should we not interpret the words of Homer (or any text) as belonging to a later (or earlier, or contemporary) writer? If we can choose to read Cervantes as if we were reading Menard, then we can also choose to read *Don Quijote* as if it had been written by Melville—or, conversely, to read *Moby Dick* as if it had been written by Cervantes. Once we agree with the premise that there is no necessary link between a given author and a given set of words, every interpretation, even the most apparently humdrum, becomes a matter of free choice: “[e]sa 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 Bachlier como si fuera de Madame Henri Bachelier.”⁷ (Borges 59). It is a remarkably disorienting thought.

⁶ “Upon evenings, in leafing through Chapter 26—never attempted by him [Menard]—I have recognized the style of our friend and, as it were, his very voice in that remarkable phrase: *the nymphs of the rivers, the dolorous and humid Echo*. This efficient conjunction of a moral adjective with a physical brings to my memory a line of Shakespeare, which we discussed one afternoon.”

⁷ “This technique, of limitless application, invites us to read through the *Odyssey* as if it had been written after the *Aeneid* and the book *Le jardin du Centaure* by Madame Henri Bachlier as if it had been written by Madame Henri Bachelier.”

II

The narrator's reading of Pierre Menard's work seems to rest on an interpretation of writing which stems from the Saussurean notion that words are a limited set of arbitrary signs. However, his reading departs from Saussure's theory in that what is signified by these signs goes far beyond the sum of their associated meanings. According to the narrator's view, writing involves an intellect ordering a set of arbitrary symbols (words): reading involves the examination of that ordering, and a perception through it (or, for the more conscientiously materialist, reconstruction from it) of the intellect that set them down. What is read through both the paragraph by Menard and that by Cervantes is decidedly not mere linguistic meaning: it is a record of the thought and feeling of each author, the one as he composes a pleasant tale about a knight from La Mancha, the other as he produces a text that curiously happens to resemble, in every detail, a story in another language written three hundred years earlier. An understanding of the intellect behind the words is fundamentally linked to what the text means, and those who stubbornly insist upon the surface or linguistic meaning of a text and ignore the consciousness that originated it are regarded as at best missing the point and at worst obstructively literalist (in the literal sense of the word, so to speak). This interpretation is intuitively appealing, and resonates with much of the everyday language used to discuss writing and literature: we regularly speak as though we perceive an author hiding just behind the words, one who shows us what he/she means with a choice phrase or metaphor and who has a distinctive personality attested by a set of repeating interests and stylistic choices (and attendant flaws or blind spots). Its core assumption is that words can and do function as a medium conducting readers to or at least towards an understanding of the author's meaning, and not merely

towards a linguistic comprehension of their structure and content.

The problem is, with a limited set of signs to draw on, more than one intellect may produce a given set of symbols. The narrator of Borges's story knows, in point of fact, that two intellects produced the same passage, and if two intellects can arrive at the same text, why not three, or a hundred? If words are understood to be merely the clothes of thought, however ill- or well-fitted, however transparent or opaque, and it is the thought itself that is valued, then it makes sense to direct one's energies past the words and to the imagined author behind them. But if the clothes can be worn by anyone, anywhere, they lose their ability to help us to see or understand the thought. Hence the crux of the story: a disconnect between the present text and the distant author. That disconnect—and how to reconnect words to some meaning beyond the purely linguistic—preoccupied many of the literary theorists of the twentieth century. Two of them in particular discussed ideas about the relation between text and meaning that have direct relevance for Borges's story.

Pierre Menard, originally published in 1939, appeared well before the emergence of critical interest in the late 1960s (and subsequent decades) about how authorship and context influence reading. Along with Borges's other writings, it might well have been partially responsible for this turn: Mabel Basterrechea goes so far as to claim that "[i]n the reading proposed here, Borges anticipates all postmodern theory in entering upon the problem of reception" (221, my translation⁸). Even though the later reflections address the nature of authorship, context, and reading at length—and frequently with considerable ingenuity—they do not

⁸ Original text: "En la lecture propuesta por este trabajo, Borges se adelanta a toda teoría postmoderna para inaugurar el problema de la recepción."

overshadow *Pierre Menard*: the questions are still very much in play, and, as any reader of the story will attest, can still create considerable excitement. For that reason, as well as for their relevance to the story at hand, a glance at how two key ideas of these latecomers interact with the story's suggestions will be useful. I will pass in silence over the venerable Jacques Derrida; his ideas are at a further remove, and aim at a different target, than do those of Barthes and Genette.

Barthes' *Le mort de l'auteur* picks up, in a sense, precisely where Borges's story leaves off. Barthes starts with the idea that the author is wholly absent from the text, a stronger version of Borges's narrator's conclusion that "author" is a kind of empty category, to be filled at the whim of the reader. We must be careful, however, with our definitions: Barthes draws a distinction, as Borges does not, between the person who happens to write a given text and the modern figure of "the author"⁹. He objects strenuously to efforts to tie meaning to the latter, and even though the former has his or her role, as *écrivain* or *scripteur*, it should not, in his view, be overstated. As a model he points to Mallarmé, who, he tells us, held that to write meant to let a language speak through oneself rather than, as a distinct individual personality, to set down words marked by an indelible personal stamp¹⁰. The idea of a disembodied language speaking through a person is, however,

⁹ "*L'auteur* est un personnage moderne, produit sans doute par notre société dans la mesure où, au sortir du Moyen Age, avec l'empirisme anglais, le rationalisme français, et la loi personnelle de la Réforme, elle a découvert le prestige de l'individu" (Barthes 491).—"The author is a modern figure, no doubt produced by our society insofar as, at the end of the middle ages, along with English empiricism, French rationalism, and the personal law of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual."

¹⁰ "[P]our lui, comme pour nous, c'est le langage qui parle, ce n'est pas l'auteur: écrire, c'est, à travers une impersonnalité préalable . . . atteindre ce point où seul le langage agit, « performe », et non « moi »" (Barthes 492).—"For him, as for us, it is the language that speaks, not the author: to write is to attain, by means of an immanent impersonality, that state where only the language acts, 'performs', and not 'me.'"

no less mystical than the idea of an author's voice seeping through a text: perhaps realizing this, Barthes aims at a more worldly interpretation in the latter half of the essay, arguing that texts are composite creatures, not just containing but made up of all the possible quotations and references and echoes drawn from the "thousand hearths of culture," for lack of a better translation of "mille foyers de la culture" (Barthes 494). Careful readers will note that he is still wide of his worldly mark: the "thousand hearths of culture" that compose a text by means of their emanations, insofar as they are separable from texts themselves, are in the same realm as Mallarmé's "language" and *Pierre Menard's* narrator's "author": a metaphysical presence hiding behind the words, an article of faith rather than a piece of evidence.

Still, the notion that we might read the meaning of a text not in terms of its author but in terms of a constant stream of references to or quotations from a variety of sources is intriguing. The process of reading becomes one of recognition rather than inference: rather than triangulating from knowledge of the text, the context, and the author/authors to arrive at a conclusion, meaning is taken in pieces as one association or another clicks into place. Barthes' emphatic assertion that what we recognize are texts or fragments of texts is both the cornerstone of the argument and, perhaps, its greatest weakness: on the one hand, it seems impossible to deny that mere text, without the aid of an author, is sufficient to generate the kind of recognition that leads to meaning; on the other hand, our ability to recognize analogues and abstract similarities means that we are not *limited* to that text (whatever form it may take). Our inferences can play a major role—and, as a type of inference, an author might still be important.

Perhaps surprisingly, Barthes and the narrator of *Pierre Menard* do share a basic premise. Barthes may do away with the

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author, but he is unable to remove the need for something to guide our interpretation of a given text: the two would agree that a phrase like “he did it” is more or less a set of raw materials for the reader, and that it takes on meaning in response to its context, both immediate and wider-ranging. Barthes and Borges’s narrator differ primarily in which part of the context they believe the reader to be most dependent upon. For Barthes, the vast pool of previous experience dominates the scene—and presumably not just “pure” reading experience. In the mental library which each reader checks in order to identify (even if only as a feeling or echo) “quotations,” we might expect to find not only written phrases but also spoken ones, pure rhythms and sounds, combinations of sound and text (for example, deliberate mispronunciations or puns), images, complex memories, etc. It seems futile, in fact, to try to exclude any part of lived experience: all of it may be drawn upon when reading (and presumably when engaging in any other kind of interpretive activity). Borges’s narrator, on the other hand, implies that relatively few factors, including the proposed author, dominate our reading, and that our interpretations depend primarily upon these. He does not regard the author as the sole basis from which a reader might reason out a given interpretation: we may add into the mix the historical period, the culture, and the literary and other contexts in which the reader imagines the text to have originated.

This story, however, is pointedly titled *Pierre Menard, Autor del Quijote*, and it is no mere whim that causes Borges to focus upon authorship as the central problem. We are intuitively familiar with the idea that the same words may mean different things when uttered by different people: “The woman who runs the new bakery has great buns” is a comment that could be taken quite differently depending only on the gender of the speaker, to say nothing of character, tone, mood, facial expression, etc. This is hardly surprising, given that much of

our language learning involves imitation, the act of repeating the words of another, frequently with an entirely different purpose and meaning. The notion that the originator of the words should be taken into account when considering their meaning is perhaps not so bizarre as Barthes would have it.

This brings us to the second key work: Gérard Genette's *Palimpsestes*. Genette's entire book is concerned with problems of identity and derivation, but it opens with the phenomenon of doubled (or tripled, etc.) texts, albeit in a context rather removed from Borges's story. The definition of parody has shifted significantly through the ages; Genette discusses at some length a definition current from the sixteenth through to the nineteenth century, according to which parody is precisely the use of words lifted from another work to direct the reader to a meaning different from that of the original, typically one lighter or more vulgar. Genette cites *Pierre Menard* directly as an example of a "minimal parody", one that is "purely semantic: Ménard [*sic*] literally rewrites the *Quijote*, and the historical distance between the two identical versions gives to the second a meaning very different from that of the first" (Genette 24fn, my translation¹¹). Except for the qualification that in parody the meaning must shift "downwards," the definition appears to be a snug fit for Pierre Menard's work. And yet a curious problem arises when we consider the narrator's insistence that Menard's *Quijote* is an original composition. The parts of it that do not correspond word-for-word to Cervantes' *Quijote* have been removed, certainly, but this is a post-hoc surgery upon a separate, already-living thing. The narrator insists on reading Menard's work not as a parody or reference to Cervantes but as a wholly

¹¹ Original text: "La performance de Ménard . . . est évidemment . . . une parodie minimale, ou purement sémantique: Ménard récrit littéralement le *Quichotte*, et la distance historique entre les deux rédactions identiques donne à la seconde un sens tout différent de celui de la première."

original composition, albeit an extremely peculiar one, appearing as it does in every detail to be a seventeenth-century Spanish novel; but this, the narrator indicates, is a tribute to Menard's literary skill, not a reflection of its provenance. To slot such a work into the category of parody, even if we limit ourselves to Genette's strictly technical definition, would be—if we trust the narrator's perspective—entirely misunderstanding Menard's project. Menard himself (if we can indulge, in Borgesian manner, in speculating about the opinions of a fictional character) might not have agreed: after all, the narrator tells us that he, Menard, did have a vague recollection of *Don Quijote* in mind when he started writing. That would bring him into line at least with Genette's definition of hypertext (that is, a text which more or less explicitly depends upon another text for its very existence) and perhaps also with the definition of parody. But the narrator insists on reading Menard's compositions as entirely original texts, which, though they happen to be identical with Cervantes' chapters, cannot be read as a reflection upon them—that is, not as parody.

This bears not only on the problem of what type of literature Pierre Menard's oeuvre is, but also on the fundamental premise of Genette's "hypertextuality," of texts derived from earlier texts by some sort of an act of transformation. Consider the following problem: Borges's narrator repeats his position that Menard's work is not a hypertext, since it only coincides with an earlier text, and is not derived from it; Menard himself disagrees. Which one is right? We may pick one side or another, but the choice will depend not on a logical determination upon which all can agree but on which character's reading we decide to trust. This is not simply because evidence is lacking or confused in this particular case: it is because the question of whether any text is a hypertext or not is a question of interpretation. This fact is somewhat obscured by Genette's pragmatic approach, and by his

conscious and advertised choice of examples that exhibit relatively clear connections with other texts. In all of these cases, it is easy to come to a consensus interpretation that there is a hypertext-hypotext¹² relationship. But we should not lose sight of the fact that a connection of any sort is a proposition about a text or set of texts: in other words, a hypothesis, and hence more vulnerable than it at first appears. In everyday terms, we can all remember occasions when we were told that a work we had previously assumed to be a “stand-alone” was in fact dependent upon some other text—or that a work we had presumed to follow some other text was in fact written before it. In both of these cases, our seemingly untroubled understanding of how the text connected to other works was overturned in an instant. *Pierre Menard* is all about the hypotheses we construct in order to read, and what happens when we overturn them: it just so happens that one of the hypotheses overturned is precisely that there must exist (in Genette’s terms) a hypertext-hypotext relationship between two works by different authors that nevertheless contain the same words in the same order. It thus serves as a timely reminder that the relationships Genette describes, intriguing though they may be, depend upon a specific interpretation of a given text, and that that interpretation is as subject to debate as any other.

III

Borges’s story casts doubt on the viability of efforts to identify an author behind the text. Though the story unsettles the notion that we can see through a text back to its author (or anything else), there is no hint of despair in it, or of abandoning the idea of an author altogether, even though it is very clear that certainty about authors will remain out of reach. The narrator of the story, indeed, speaks of the

¹² “Hypertext” denotes, as mentioned above, a text that depends upon another for its existence; “hypotext” denotes the text depended upon.

uncertainty around authorship as an enriching rather than a terrifying prospect: “Menard, acaso sin quererlo, ha enriquecido . . . el arte detenido y rudimentario de la lectura”¹³ (Borges 59). The narrator is willing to regard each interpretation, whether traditional or newfangled, as an ornament—though since the notion of an “original” is rendered trivial, they are not ornaments to anything. This approach to successive layers recalls Derrida’s notion of the supplement; it is distinct, however, in that while Derrida characteristically views the supplement as lacking, there is no hint in Borges’s tale that any interpretation is less valid or less potentially positive than another. The notion of overwhelming profusion comes up again in *La Biblioteca de Babel*, in a much more sinister form, and the arbitrariness it implies is brought into full view¹⁴. In *Pierre Menard*, however, the focus is on the freedom bestowed upon the reader by an unexpected release of the text from a connection to any particular author. The description of traditional reading practices as “detenido y rudimentario” even implies that the narrator believes his own reading practices to be sophisticated and consonant with his age, anticipating the postmodern emphasis on the active role of the reader in the creation of a text. Even as the story undermines the traditional vision of the transparent text, its optimistic (if somewhat peculiar) implication that the proper application of this new method of reading may result in new insights and new riches for the literary world should not be dismissed offhand. ☉

¹³ “Menard, perhaps without any such intention, has enriched ... the laggard and rudimentary art of reading.”

¹⁴ This story’s narrator lives within an apparently infinite library, whose books are filled with random (or apparently random) sequences of letters, which occasionally form coherent words or sentences; all possible truths are by definition included somewhere within this infinity of symbols, but so are all possible falsehoods, and the denizens of the library have no way to distinguish between them.

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