Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote Study Guide

Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote by Jorge Luis Borges

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Introduction

The *Oxford Book of Latin American Essays* (1997) calls "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" "the most influential essay ever written in Latin America." Typical of Borges' style, the work does not fall neatly into the genre of narrative story or of essay it is a fictional essay. Borges wrote it to test his mind after recovering from a head injury that gave him hallucinations and was complicated by a dangerous case of septicemia. In the form of a scholarly article, it tells of one Pierre Menard, a French symbolist recently deceased, who had undertaken the absurd task of rewriting Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as a product of his own creativity. Menard wanted his version to "coincide with" the original word for word. The narrator applauds and legitimizes the act as academic heroism. Because of Borges' erudite reputation, the publication of this story sent scholars scrambling to discover the obscure author from Nimes, Pierre Menard. They unearthed a minor essayist, with a forgettable published essay on the psychological analysis of handwriting. The narrator of the Borges story, himself a fussy pedagogue, explains that Menard succeeded in indoctrinating himself so thoroughly in Cervantes' culture, thoughts, and language that the finished portions of his *Quixote* exactly match the Cervantes text. Furthermore, the narrator calls Menard's achievement "infinitely richer" than that of Cervantes, due to its modern philosophical perspective and the obstacles Menard overcame to produce it. The narrator means that the modern context imbues the same words with differ ent meanings, presaging postmodernism readerresponse theories. As Donald Yates points out in his introduction to a collection of Borges' fiction, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" "quite subtly anticipated critical literary theory that would emerge a quarter of a century later." The story would be included in *Ficciones* (1944), a widely translated collection and the first Latin American work to achieve international acclaim.

Author Biography

Jorge Luis Borges unintentionally helped to found Postmodernism through his blurring of the lines of genre and the borders between fiction and reality. Borges was born in 1899 in Buenos Aires, Argentina to middle-class parents. His father, a lawyer and psychology teacher, taught Borges philosophy and encouraged his love of reading and thinking. His mother came from a long line of freedom fighters, and taught him perseverance. Both parents spoke and read English, as did Borges' paternal grandmother, who lived with them, and the nanny she procured for the family. Ultimately, Borges would be fluent in Spanish, English, French, and German; he learned to read Italian and Latin. He grew to adolescence in Palermo, playing fantasy games in the library and garden with his younger sister Norah, who was his only friend. Jorge (or "Georgie" as his mother called him), translated Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince" into Spanish when he was nine years old. With thick glasses and no interest in sports, the young Borges fell victim to local school bullies. But his luck changed in 1914 when he was fifteen, for his family moved to Geneva, Switzerland (where the family, naive about the severity of European tensions, was stranded for all of World War I) to seek medical help for his father's blindness. In Europe, Borges began his intellectual life in earnest, encouraged by fellow intellectual students. After returning to Buenos Aires in 1921, he worked as an assistant librarian for nine years, reading and writing in his spare time. In 1938, a bump on the head that got infected and led to septicemia nearly killed him, but his hallucinations inspired a turn toward fantasy in his writing. To test his mind, he wrote "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote", which was well received. Borges lost his library post when the Fascist Juan Peron came to power in 1946. However, his literary achievements were recognized through his appointment as President of the Sociedad Argentian de Ecritores (Society of Argentine Writers, or SADE) in 1950. By now, Borges was fighting blindness, to which his father had succumbed years earlier. He dictated poems to his mother, who read to him in Spanish, English, and French and took dictation from him for years. After the 1955 Cordoba Revolution, Borges was named Director of the National Library. Now completely blind, he quipped, "I speak of God's splendid irony in granting me at one time 800,000 books and darkness."

Love played a minor role in Borges' life. He would not marry the love of his youth, Elsa Astete Millan, until forty years later, after her first husband died. Their marriage then lasted only three years, after which Borges returned to his mother's home, where he stayed until her death in 1973. Later, in 1986, he married his secretary, Maria Kodama, on his deathbed.

Octavio Paz noted that for Borges, the lines of genres are blurred, "his essays read like stories, his stories are poems, and his essays make us think, as though they were essays." In 1961, Borges was awarded the Formentor's International Publisher's Prize jointly with Samuel Beckett. He continued to write, speak, and travel widely for the next twenty- five years. He died of liver cancer in 1986 in Geneva.

Borges also wrote under the pen names B. Lynch Davis, B. Suarez Lynch, F(rancisco) Bustos, and H(onorario) Bustos Domecq.

Plot Summary

The story takes the form of a scholarly article about a recently deceased novelist. The novelist's name, Pierre Menard, does not appear until the third sentence. The narrator of the article establishes credibility by citing literary ladies with unfamiliar names, then presents a catalogue of writings found among Menard's private papers. The narrator asserts that this list is more accurate than one published earlier by a Madame Henri Bachelier in a newspaper with Protestant leanings. The list encompasses an unusually wide range of interests, from love sonnets to Boolean logic. Many are esoteric and strange, such as an invective against the French poet Paul Valery which is really "the exact reverse of Menard's true opinion of Valery," and an article on the elimination of one of the pawns in the game of chess, wherein Menard "proposes, recommends, disputes, and ends by rejecting this innovation." These and other poems and essays represent the "visible" part of Menard's works.

Now the narrator turns to Menard's crowning achievement, which the narrator deems "subterranean, interminably heroic, and. . .inconclusive." The rest of the essay concerns itself with Menard's reauthoring of just over two chapters of *Don Quixote*. This was the result of a project partially inspired by a theory of "total identification" with an author. Menard undertook "to know Spanish well, reembrace the Catholic faith, to fight against Moors and Turks, to forget European history between 1602 and 1918, and to *be* Miguel de Cervantes."

In a serious tone, the narrator extols Menard's ambitious project and acknowledges his accomplishment of having completed the ninth and thirtyeighth and a portion of the twenty-second chapters of Part One of *Don Quixote*. Although the task was "complex in the extreme and futile from the outset," Menard succeeded in producing these segments literally word for word.

The narrator considers Menard's achievement far greater than that of Cervantes, because for a Spaniard of the early seventeenth century to write in his own language of contemporary events was not as significant an effort as Menard had to make to write in archaic Spanish about events he knew only through research into history. The narrator quotes several long passages from a letter he says he received from Menard, in which the Frenchman justifies his project. In the letter, Menard explains that he chose *Don Quixote* because he had read it at age twelve and had forgotten it to the point where his memory of the text paralleled the "anterior image of a book not yet written." Thus he could begin with similar ideas to those of Cervantes when he began to write *Don Quixote*. The narrator asserts that even though Menard never completed his project, he sometimes imagines that he did, and that while reading the Cervantes version, he further imagines that he detects the Frenchman's style of writing.

To demonstrate the significance of Menard's achievement, the narrator juxtaposes two identical passages, first Cervantes' and then Menard's. The reader is directed to notice the subtle shift in interpreting the phrase "truth, whose mother is history." In Cervantes' text, the phrase is mere rhetoric, praising truth. However, in Menard's identical version,

"truth, whose mother is history" carries the syntactic weight of the modern consciousness of history's remaking of the past, with its concept that history creates truth. The narrator explains, "Historical truth, for him, is not what took place; it is what we think took place." The narrator draws the reader's attention to differences in acculturation that affect the reader's expectation and interpretation. The meanings of the words change over time. The appreciation of style also changes, for whereas the language sounds suitable for a seventeenthcentury Spanish author, it seems affectedly archaic and stiff when it comes from a modern French author.

The story ends with the narrator's commendation of Menard for having "enriched the art of reading" through his use of "deliberate anachronism and fallacious attribution." These are the devices that Borges himself uses in his story.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

This "fictional essay" takes the form of a literary review of the work of the deceased French symbolist and poet Pierre Menard. The narrator is prompted to write the essay after reading a recent article by Madame Henri Bachelier, who he believes has not done justice to Menard's accomplishments. Therefore, this review is written to set the record straight. While admittedly not a great authority on Menard's work, the narrator believes that testimonies from the Baroness de Barcourt and Countess de Bagnoregio will lend authority to this review.

The essay begins by listing a detailed, chronological account of Menard's work, which includes various obscure sonnets, biographical monographs and numerous translations. After presenting the catalog, the narrator suggests that Menard's most important work is his body of unfinished writings, which take the form of selected readings based on *Don Quixote*.

The narrator is concerned over recent "parasitic" writings by other authors, who take original characters such as Hamlet and Don Quixote and place them in bizarre twentieth century plot lines. The narrator agrees with Menard in stating that these books are loathsome and serve no real purpose. Furthermore, it is insulting to suggest that Menard undertook this style of writing when he wrote the *Quixote.* The narrator points out that Menard "did not want to compose another *Quixote*, which is easy, but to write *the Quixote itself."* Menard did not want to copy the book; his goal was to write a few pages independently, which would coincide, "word for word, and line for line," with the original version by the author, Miguel de Cervantes.

In order to accomplish this, Menard proposed several possibilities. These included learning Spanish well, rediscovering the Catholic faith, fighting against the Moors or the Turks, forgetting the history of Europe from 1602 to 1918, and becoming Miguel de Cervantes. Menard later rejected these possibilities and the idea of becoming Miguel de Cervantes in order to write the *Quixote*. He believed that it would be far more interesting to continue being Pierre Menard and to arrive at the *Quixote* through his own experiences. Menard believed that Cervantes had it easy when he wrote *Don Quixote* in the seventeenth century; all Cervantes had to do was allow the power of language and invention to guide him. Menard believed it would be much more difficult, almost impossible, for him to write such a book in the twentieth century.

The narrator writes that while the texts of *Don Quixote* and the *Quixote* are identical, Menard's version is infinitely richer, more vivid, and subtler in style. The narrator finds Cervantes's chapters to be clumsy and provincial, devoting too much time to the emphasis of history and local color. Fortunately, Menard correctly eliminated these elements from the *Quixote*. To be fair, however, the narrator does acknowledge that there are some flaws in Menard's work. Primarily, as a twentieth century French poet,

Menard failed to master the seventeenth century Spanish as well as Cervantes had done in his version.

The review credits Menard for championing thinking, analyzing and inventing as everyday commonplace tasks, which should not be considered occasional functions of the brain, but ongoing requirements. The narrator concludes that Menard assisted in resurrecting the art of reading and that he should be attributed with giving people a way to reexamine the old tired classics with new eyes to adventure.

Analysis

Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote was originally written in Spanish and published in 1939. This essay, written in the form of a literary-style review, serves as a satirical parody on the interpretation that readers bring to any written work. This tongue-in-cheek narrative is written about an imaginary French poet and symbolist, Pierre Menard. The narrator (presumably Borges) pays tribute to Menard for writing, not copying, pages from Miguel de Cervantes' novel, *Don Quixote*. The irony is that even though Menard's work is word for word identical to the original novel, the narrator finds it to be a richer and more vivid account.

Borges supported the belief that no one individual can lay claim to originality in literature. All writers have borrowed from previous writers and writings. This idea is a central theme in the Menard narrative. The narrator of the essay points out that the text of the *Quixote* never changed between the original version and Menard's version, yet it is considered superior. Why? What did change? While the words of *Don Quixote*, written in the seventeenth century did not alter, the reader did. Borges' point is that every twentieth-century reader involuntarily writes a new version of any story he reads. He contends that, we, the readers, are influenced by our own cultural experiences and histories. Ultimately, we are the ones who will shape a story to fit, and support our interpretation of what we think the story should be.

Another important concept found in the narrative is Borges' opinion on translation. It has been argued that Borges used the essay as a way to draw attention to the nature of accurate translation, particularly in literary works. Borges worked tirelessly throughout his life to translate his most admired authors, including Poe, Kafka, and Faulkner, into Spanish. He believed that translation played a pivotal role, in that it could improve, contradict, or validate an original work. This is keenly demonstrated in the essay when the narrator makes the point that Menard's writings were "word for word and line for line" identical to Cervantes. Yet, the meaning of *Don Quixote*, written by a seventeenth century Spanish soldier, becomes completely different when revisited by a twentieth century French poet.

With tongue-in-cheek, Borges states that Menard knew that in order to write the *Quixote* he would have to forget the history of Europe between 1602 and 1918 or fight the Moors and Turks again. As the reader of this essay, we know this to be impossible. Borges was simply reiterating the point that every reader brings his own interpretation, based on his

own cultural experiences, to a book. To attempt to eliminate those influences, such as hundreds of years of history and our own cultural experiences, is not a realistic endeavor.

In summary, *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* is a classic essay on interpretation. It makes the reader consider what truly makes a book a masterpiece. Is it the written word on paper or the genius of the author or individual interpretation that brings the piece to life?

Bibliography

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Characters

Madame Bachelier

A literary lioness who supposedly published a "fallacious" catalogue of Menard's works in a Protestant newspaper. Madame Bachelier, like the other literary personages in this story, is little more than a footnote. As observed by Borges' biographer Martin Stabb, "believable flesh-and-blood people are almost entirely absent in his [Borges'] work." Borges himself said in a 1971 interview, "As to characters, I don't think I have evolved a single character. I think I'm always thinking in terms of myself, of my limitations, and of the possible lives I should have lived and haven't."

Simon Kautsch

A philanthropist married to the Countess de Bagnoregio who has been slandered by those to whom he gives.

Pierre Menard

Pierre Menard is the subject of the fictional essay "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," but he is hardly a character in the true sense of that word. Rather, Pierre Menard offers the narrator a reason to expound on his theories of language, memory, reading, and historical context. A historical Pierre Menard did live in Nimes, France, at the time of which Borges writes, though his published essay on the psychoanalytical analysis of handwriting (1931) was unremarkable. A Louis Menard (1822-1901), possibly Pierre's father or grandfather, had attempted to rewrite the *Odyssey*. Borges' Menard is either a fictional composite or a spin-off, changed by the context into which Borges writes him. According to the narrator, Menard, a French symbolist, decided to write *Don Quixote*, again, from his own creative mind. To do so, Menard had "to know Spanish well, to reembrace the Catholic faith, to fight against Moors and Turks, to forget European history between 1602 and 1918, and to *be* Miguel de Cervantes." The narrator cites a letter from Menard to himself in which the French author justified his project and described its inherent problems. For one, Menard has to reconstruct what Cervantes wrote spontaneously. For another, "it is not in vain that three hundred years have passed" between Cervantes' composition and his. Nevertheless, Menard chooses to "arrive at *Don Quixote* through the experiences of Pierre Menard" rather than attempting somehow to "be" Cervantes. Thus, Menard's text can be read as a twentieth-century work, and its words connote contemporary meanings. As to his choice of texts, Menard considered *Don Quixote* an "unnecessary" work (unlike Poe's *Bateau Ivre*, a work he sees as a cornerstone of literary history). In addition, Menard had read the book as an adolescent, and his hazy memory of it would serve the same function as "the imprecise, anterior image of a book not yet written." Unfortunately, Menard's words

are compromised by his "resigned habit of propounding ideas which were the strict reverse of those he preferred."

Don Quixote

The main character in Miguel Cervantes' 1605 picaresque novel, *Don Quixote*, a novel that Pierre Menard partially rewrote. Don Quixote is the idealistic hero of Cervantes's novel. In Chapter 38 of the novel that bears his name, the inveterate soldier Quixote presents his preference for arms over letters. The innocent Don Quixote spends his days looking for damsels in distress, and falls in love with a commoner whom he mistakes for a noble and fair lady.

Monsieur Edmond Teste

Monsieur Teste is the title character of a collection of sketches attempting to express pure consciousness written by French poet and writer Paul Valery (1871-1945), a protege of Symbolist poet Stephane Mallarme (1842-1898). Edmond Teste is considered to be Valery's alter ego.

Baroness de Bacourt

A lady at whose social gatherings held each Thursday (her *vendredis*) the narrator allegedly met "the late lamented poet," Pierre Menard, the subject of his story. In his catalogue of Menard's "visible" works, the narrator cites "a cycle of admirable sonnets" written for the Baroness. In a footnote, he adds that the Baroness is currently "sketching a portrait" of Menard.

Countess de Bagnoregio

A minor writer who has granted her consent for the narrator to present his research on Pierre Menard. The Countess, he adds, has "one of the most refined minds in the principality of Monaco" and is now married to Simon Kautsch, a misunderstood philanthropist.

Miguel de Cervantes

Author of *Don Quixote* (1605) and contemporary of William Shakespeare. They died on the same day: April 23, 1616.

Themes

Memory

Memory is what is retained (or created, in Borges' terms) in the mind from experience. The theme of memory fascinated Borges, who wrote "Pierre Menard" as a test of his own mental ability after a minor head injury turned serious and gave him hallucinations. Borges' concept of memory roughly parallels that of Marcel Proust, a writer whom Borges introduced to literature circles in Argentina. Proust's landmark seven-volume novel about memory, *Remembrance of Things Past* (1917), exemplifies the theory of French philosopher Henri Bergson that humans do not experience life when events happen, but later, in forming memories of those events. The processing of memories, Bergson postulated, takes place in the *duree* [duration], deep in the mind, where the superficial constraints of clock time do not interfere. Bergson's theories of time and memory inspired the Symbolist poets, Marcel Proust, and also Borges among others.

Like Proust, Borges attempted to express his own conception of memory and time in his fiction. At the end of his story "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" the narrator writes, "Already in memory a fictitious past takes the place of the other past, of which we know nothing, not even that it is false." In "Pierre Menard," the narrator postulates memory as a creative act. He compares memory, an act of reconstructing the past from the parts retained in the mind, with creation, which also constructs a whole from parts. Pierre Menard had read *Don Quixote* long ago, and had forgotten parts of it. His faded memory corresponds to "the imprecise, anterior image of a book not yet written." In other words, Menard's hazy memory resembles the germ of an unborn idea, one that has not yet fully formed into a creative vision.

Meaning and Interpretation

In a 1967 interview with Richard Burgin, Borges said that "every time a book is read or reread, then something happens to the book. . .and every time you read it, it's really a new experience." A reader comes to a story with a set of culturally shaped experiences and values that influence the way the reader understands the meaning of the words on the page. As the reader matures and gains new experiences, new perspectives, these meanings may change, because the reader's core beliefs and values have changed. The reader also responds to, or pays attention to, different aspects of the story depending on his or her status in life and personal interests. As in life, an older person pays attention to different issues in a text than a younger person does. A woman may interpret the same scenes differently than would a man. A person who has recently lost a friend or relative to death may notice different details than one who has never experienced such a loss. Differences between readers and between reading sessions also occur on a cultural level, as societies and cultures change over time. Readers of each new era pay attention to new details, as they experience shifts in values, beliefs, and perspectives. Things once taken for granted are questioned. Consciousness is

raised on new issues and old ones pass into obscurity. Though the words of a passage remain the same, over time, connotations associated with the words impart new meanings and resonate to new values.

Even within a given time and place, the same phrase can take on different meanings according to different contexts. Literary critic Stanley Fish explains this phenomenon in his 1980 essay, "Is There a Text in This Class?" According to Fish, no sentence can be understood outside of context. In other words, the reader can only interpret the meaning of a sentence by mentally connecting the words to previously held beliefs and knowledge. These beliefs and knowledge derive from the person's social context: all readers are "situated" within a particular culture and history. A sentence is written or uttered in a given "situation" that impacts the way it will be interpreted. The phrase from Fish's essay "Is there a text in this class?" could refer to assigned books to read or a text left behind. Fish explains,

> . . .within those situations, the normative meaning of an utterance will always be obvious or at least accessible, although within another situation that same utterance, no longer the same, will have another normative meaning that will be no less obvious and accessible. . .This does not mean that there is no way to discriminate between the meanings an utterance will have in different situations, but that the discrimination will already have been made by virtue of our being in a situation (we are never not in one) and that in another situation the discrimination will also already have been made, but differently.

Reader-response theorists debate over whether meaning derives solely from the reader's awareness and creation or whether the author prescribes meaning in the form of words on a page that invoke connotations. The difference is significant, and lies at the heart of "Pierre Menard."

The two identical passages of text, one by Cervantes and one by Menard, demonstrate how the act of reading imbues a text with meaning. The second interpretation of the phrase "history, the mother of truth" becomes Borges' own understanding of William James' philosophy of pragmatism. Thus his own beliefs and knowledge reflect his interpretation of Menard's passage, which he attempts to pass on to the reader. According to Stanley Fish, how the reader "gets" that meaning is another thing altogether.

Style

The Literary Hoax

In a 1976 interview, Borges admitted that "Pierre Menard" is "what we might call a mystification, or a hoax." A hoax is an attempt to present a text as authentic, either for monetary gain or as a joke. A literary hoax often takes the form of a text that the author presents as authentic, perhaps as translation of a recently discovered scroll or long-lost manuscript. In one of the chapters of *Don Quixote* rewritten by Menard, chapter IX of Book I, the narrator tells of having purchased by chance an old Arabic scroll at the silk market, and mentions that the scroll just happened to contain a missing fragment of the history of Don Quixote of La Mancha. Having found the missing piece, the narrator continues his story. Borges parodies the found manuscript with Menard's re-invented manuscript. Rather than finding a lost work, however, Menard writes a work all over again, publishing a story that is not lost, but already published and extant.

Borges' literary hoax echoes another idea from *Don Quixote*. In Cervantes' prologue, a friend tells the narrator to fabricate bits of Latin and throw in random historical references, so that he "may perhaps be taken for a scholar, which is honorable and profitable these days." The friend also advises including several notable authors in the beginning, to give the book authority. Borges takes his cue from Cervantes. He begins with two testimonials that authorize his essay and he lists an impressive catalogue of Menard's writings to authenticate Menard as a viable writer. Borges creates a character with a fictitious list of works (paralleling the discovered long-lost texts), but they are trivial, personal writing whose discovery is nearly meaningless. These works, which the narrator presumably found among Menard's personal effects after Menard's death, are quirky and contrived. Perhaps Borges' narrator takes comfort in the assurances provided to the narrator of *Don Quixote* by the "intelligent" friend that there is no reason to fear discovery in this deceit, for "no one will take the trouble to ascertain whether you follow your authorities or not."

Literary hoaxes have existed since ancient Egyptian times, when merchants offered large sums for Greek manuscripts to sell to the Ptolemaic rulers. With such a reward, many false replicas of Greek documents were fabricated and sold at a profit. "Pierre Menard." in its own way, has also succeeded very well as a literary hoax. Scholars continue to conjecture who might be the original Menard, and one Borges expert, Daniel Balderston, has devoted fifteen years to studying and recreating all of the historical and literary knowledge that Borges drew upon to write his essays, including the story "Pierre Menard." In the introduction to his 1993 work, *Out of Context* , Balderston remarks that his years of research have given him new insight into the "fun Borges had at the time of writing ["Pierre Menard"].

Ambiguity and Oxymoron

Ambiguity is openness to interpretation; it is writing that allows□or forces□the reader to contrive meaning independently. Ambiguity comes in degrees, and Borges' stories lie at the high end of the scale. His stories cause the reader to puzzle over their meaning. Usually, when a story, poem, essay, or other piece of writing contains a phrase that is difficult to comprehend, the story's context gives pertinent clues. However, many Borges stories resist interpretation because the context also remains mysterious. Sometimes even knowing the facts does not help. Of how much use is knowing whether Pierre Menard existed or not? Or whether he actually tried to rewrite *Don Quixote*? Does it really matter who the Baroness de Bacourt was? In other places the narrator frustrates the reader with oxymoronic sentences, such as when he attributes to Menard the notion that "all times and places are the same, or are different."

In "Pierre Menard," the narrator proclaims that "Ambiguity is a richness." The narrator's story contains dozens of high-sounding but ambiguous statements, such as "merely astonishing" and "pointless travesties." In both of these phrases, the words "astonishing" and "travesties" are rather vague, but the modifiers "merely" and "pointless," rather than clarifying their referents, qualify them beyond sense into nebulous oxymorons. "Astonishing" means something extraordinary, while "merely" connotes something commonplace, its opposite or near opposite. Somehow a sense of quiet surprise comes through the oxymoron in spite of its self-contradiction. Likewise in the phrase "swept along by the inertia of language and the imagination," inertia means staying on a given path, thus lacking the creativity of imagination. Yet, the phrase manages to carry the sense of being at the mercy of language and imagination, as of a force outside of oneself. The process of deriving the meaning of Borgesian oxymorons requires the reader to reconcile the opposing terms. Jaime Alazraki, in an article called "Oxymoronic Structure in Borges' Essays," explains how the incongruity "is only illusory. The two components clash on a conventional level only to reach a deeper level of reality. Like any other trope, it represents an effort to correct through language the deficiencies of language itself." Borges' stories demand that the reader create meaning by discerning it from his rich but ambiguous prose, by navigating between opposing terms; it is not just Menard who has "enriched the slow and rudimentary art of reading by means of a new technique," but Borges himself.

Bricolage

"Bricolage" is something made out of whatever is at hand, of available bits and pieces, or trifles. It comes from the French verb *bricoler*, meaning to putter about. A short story that employs bricolage uses details that do not contribute to what Edgar Allan Poe termed the "single effect" sought by early modernist short story writers. Following Poe, conventional modernist wisdom had it that, due to the brevity of the short story, each of its elements must contribute to the story's theme and meaning. As Elizabeth Bowen said in her preface to *The Faber Book of Modern Short Stories*, a short story "must have tautness and clearness; it must contain no passage not aesthetically relevant to the

whole." The modern short story was meant to be lyrical, to have the concise intensity of a poem. Bricolage resists lyricism by using a motley arrangement of symbols that evoke various responses and disrupt the possibility of a holistic, lyrical meaning. Bricolage is a postmodern device, exemplified in the works of novelists Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo and short story writer Bobbie Ann Mason. In "Pierre Menard" Borges employs bricolage in the catalogue of the "visible product of Menard's pen." The list includes works on chess, sonnets, and symbolic logic, an assortment that was not unusual for intellectuals of the early modern period such as Menard (and also Borges). The list contributes to the story a sense of everyday reality and of the triviality of Menard's life.

Historical Context

Between the World Wars in Argentina

It is not without significance that one of the chapters of the Quixote rewritten by Pierre Menard concerns a debate between "arms and letters." In 1939, Hitler was moving a substantial army into Poland and Czechoslovakia and 7,500 Jewish businesses were destroyed in Germany on Kristallnacht (Night of Crystal, named for the broken storefront windows) on November 9 and 10, 1938. Borges had been trapped in Zurich during World War I, his father having made the mistake of taking his family with him to Europe in 1914 in order to seek treatment for advancing blindness. The Borges family had ties to Europe, as did (and does) Argentina itself, since at that time roughly one-third of Argentines were European immigrants, some of them Jews who had left Hitler's Germany. The military armament and sense of impending disaster in Europe would have been apparent to Borges as he wrote. He courageously denounced Hitler and his program of a "final solution" of exterminating all Jews in the pages of the Argentine literary magazine *Sur*, where "Pierre Menard" would later be published.

Having had a history of political instability, Argentina found itself during the inter-War years with numerous thriving Fascist organizations, and frequent shifts occurred between democratic to Fascist leadership. Harboring German agents and generally supportive of the pro-Axis Powers, Argentina maintained neutrality long into World War II, even after the attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan. In 1945, it joined the Allies just in time to be counted among the winning nations for the final victory.

Modernism and Postmodernism

Modernism was an early-twentieth-century reaction against the movements of naturalism and Romanticism of the nineteenth century. It retained elements of the Symbolist movement of the late nineteenth century, especially the Symbolist interest in metaphor and in human consciousness. Borges was not just a modernist writer but a transitional one whose work began in modernism and helped to shape postmodernism as he moved from his *gaucho* (Argentine cowboy) stories and mysteries into his metaphysical experiments.

Although Borges claimed to have no personal philosophy, his works demonstrate the influence of several eighteenth-century philosophers whose theories inspired modernist thought. Borges admired Hume and Berkeley for their notions of the self as a motley and ever-changing collection of different perceptions, and he spoke frequently of Schopenhauer's concept of a universal will that can only be contained through the intellect. Borges found literary inspiration in the essentially pessimistic stories of Henry James and Franz Kafka, noting that neither of these authors developed characters, but rather wrote parables composed of intricate plots. The Borgesian turn from storytelling toward philosophy and metaphysics became pivotal in launching the postmodern

movement, in which authors, in a sense beginning with Borges, challenged the separation between reality and fiction by blurring these lines in their stories. Postmodern literature, presaged by Borges' style and interests, self-consciously destabilized traditional conventions of character, genre, and plot.

Literary Heritage

The literary heritage of Borges' fiction can be understood in the broader context of Latin-American literature, and more specifically, Argentine literature. Before conquest and colonization by European forces, the native Indian cultures of Latin- America had a well-developed tradition of written and oral literature. Latin-American literature since colonization emerged from the narratives of the conquered native Indian peoples as well as the European conquerors themselves. Later, the literature sprang from the Native Indian's struggles against colonial domination, which became known as a "literature of oppression." Latin-American literature in the latter half of the twentieth century developed a concern with literary and linguistic form, as exemplified by the experimental short stories of Borges, first published in the late 1940s. Borges also imported the avant-garde poetic movement of "Ultraism" (*Ultraismo*, named for the literary journal *Ultra,* to which he was a regular contributor) from Spain to Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1921. Although Borges later moved away from Ultraist principles, revising much of this early poetry, his influence upon other Argentine and Latin American writers remained significant.

Critical Overview

Early criticism about Borges centered on his poetry, and when he began to write essays, most critics preferred his poems. His works appeared primarily in the literary magazine *Sur*, which was a fledgling venture when he first contributed to its pages, but which later emerged as one of South American's most important venues for new Hispanic literature. Surprisingly, Borges gained national attention despite his apparent disinterest in his nation's turbulent political scene, in an era when Argentine writers proved their courage through polemical writing. He was also criticized for his literary games, and the fact that certain of his key phrases, themes, and devices tended to crop up again and again. Fellow Argentine writer Ernesto Sabato facetiously asked, "Will he be condemned from now on to plagiarize himself?" At least one compatriot recognized Borges' groundbreaking technique; Cesar Fernandez Moreno called him "a premature phenomenon of our culture" under whose tutelage the country would one day gain the literary acumen to vie with European writers. An early work of criticism by Ana Maria Barranechea (1957) viewed Borges through the lens of "irreality," thus placing him firmly within the modernist movement. Her view of him is rather dark, seeing in him "the horrifying presence of the infinite and the disintegration of substance into reflections and dreams." It was the European expatriots living in Argentina who ensured that Borges' works were translated into French, Italian, and German, thus exposing him to international criticism with the result in 1961 that he shared the Formentor International Publisher's Prize with Samuel Beckett. John Updike, in his capacity as book reviewer for the *New Yorker*, hinted in 1965 that in Borges might be found a proposal for "some sort of essential revision in literature itself." In 1967, Colombian novelist and liberal Gabriel Garcia Marquez said of Borges, "He is one of the writers. . . I have read most, and yet he is perhaps the one I like least" because he "writes about mental realities, he is sheer evasion." However, in the same year, John Barth found in Borges the inspiration for his essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," published in the *Atlantic*. Barth's theory comprised the "death of the author," the consequence of all stories having already been told. Barth called this state of affairs "the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities." Barth cites the story "Pierre Menard" as an example of "the difficulty, perhaps unnecessity, of writing original works of literature." Borges, according to Barth, offered a new literary agenda, to self-consciously imitate what has been written already. Barth himself adhered to this agenda by writing his "Lost in the Funhouse," also published in the *Atlantic* in 1968. The Borges theme of the labyrinth serves as the central organizing metaphor for Barth's short story.

The sixties saw Borges responding to international interest in his writing, and he traveled worldwide on lecture and reading tours. However, in Argentina as well as abroad, Borges was often seen as an anomaly in contrast to writers committed to social change, such as civil rights and feminist advocates. Argentine critics and fellow writers accused him of solipsism, alone and impotent in his narrow world of dreams and labyrinths. Mexican critic Jaime Garcia Terres called him "a sort of selfsufficient vacuum." Reader-response theories of the eighties brought about a shift in valuing this aspect of Borges, such that Jean Marco applauded his "context-free paradigm which

can be reactivated through reading at any time and under any circumstances." In other words, Borges' lack of social "commitment" (context), his interest in surfaces and the artifice of writing, is now considered significant and relevant. This revaluation derives from the shift over the last twenty years from political writing to interest in issues of reading and interpretation. The concern over the sources for his numerous allusions to minor authors (whether apocryphal or historical) now resonates to the postmodern sense that the context has no pertinence. If, on one hand, he made up certain allusions, then his works parody reality; if, on the other hand, his allusions are real, yet unimportant, then his works, again, parody reality. Thus, recent criticism, encouraged by the appearance of three new centenary editions (commemorating the hundredth anniversary of his birth in 1899) of his poems, stories, and essays, respectively, has responded favorably to the Borgesian irony.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Hamilton is an English teacher at Cary Academy in Cary, North Carolina. In this essay she examines the theme of reading in the literary project of "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote."

"Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" is metafiction about the overlap between essay writing and story writing. Writing certainly lies at the center of the story, beginning with the title. However, "Pierre Menard" is also "metareading," a story that concerns itself with the relationship between writing and reading.

References to writing abound in this story. The narrator establishes Pierre Menard's credibility as an author by listing a catalogue of his written work, his "visible *oeuvre*." The works represent a range of types, from sonnets and letters to monographs, manuscripts, and translations. The last item of the list, handwritten, is about one of the elements unique to writing: punctuation. The breadth of topics treated by the writings in the catalogue testifies to Menard's intelligence and worth; his writing identi- fies him as an erudite and prolific writer. His most impressive work is a project to "produce a number of pages which coincided□word for word and line by line□with those of Miguel de Cervantes." The narrator applauds this act of re-envisioning an entire novel, calling the finished product "perhaps the most significant writing of our time." Menard himself, in a letter quoted by the narrator, equates his undertaking with "the final term of a theological or metaphysical proof" or to God. Menard assures the narrator in his letter that "The task I have undertaken is not in essence difficult. . .If I could just be immortal, I could do it." Thus, the creative act of writing is placed on a divine level. Menard is also legitimized in a chain of biblical-sounding "begats," as a descendent of a line of writers beginning with Poe. He is following an honored tradition. The novel that Menard chooses to re-create, Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, also carries a theme of writing, being a new written genre (the picaresque novel) and having many authorial intrusions that constantly remind the reader of the act of writing that produced the novel. The difference between the author's goals is that while Cervantes' work views writing as a means to the end of narration, Menard's project centers on how writing affects the act of reading, and not on writing as an end in itself.

The crowning moment of "Pierre Menard" occurs when the narrator places the excerpt from Cervantes' novel alongside the excerpt from Menard's identical version. The narrator's analysis then proves that reading, the flip side of writing, depends upon its audience to be appreciated. In the last paragraph of "Pierre Menard", the narrator summarizes the impact of Menard's having rewritten the *Quixote* as a contribution to reading: "Menard (perhaps without wishing it) has enriched, by means of a new technique, the hesitant and rudimentary art of reading." Given that the final product matches the original Quixote word for word, how can a second Quixote, an identical twin text of the first, have any bearing on reading, if the words are exactly the same? The answer lies in the "rudimentary art" of reading itself, which is an act not of translation, but of interpretation and putting into other words. Reading, as Borges' story illustrates, is *always* an act of interpretation, for although the texts appear the same on

the page (though begotten by a different process), they "mean" differently. Reading is a complex art that can be accomplished on many different levels.

In "Pierre Menard" Borges presents many kinds of reading, of varying levels of complexity, that might be arranged in a "hierarchy of reading" corresponding roughly to psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a system of organizing human goals. On the bottom of Maslow's pyramid are the most basic human requirements for survival: food, water, air, sleep. At the top, Maslow placed the human need for self-actualization. In Borges' hierarchy, the basic "survival" reading skill is simple cataloguing, the librarian's skill that Borges practiced as an assistant librarian. The narrator of "Pierre Menard" proves his skill of cataloguing early in the story, when he carefully lists all of Menard's writings, correcting omissions of earlier lists. The next level up on Borges' hierarchy of reading would be comprehension. In the narrator's annotations of the catalogued items, he demonstrates his skill of comprehension, for the topic of each item is succinctly summarized. Comprehension is a relatively simple tool used by the high school student to learn parts of a text. However, comprehension lacks depth; one might comprehend the essence of a well-known book (such as *Don Quixote*) simply because it has become an icon of culture. Regarding *Don Quixote* the narrator points out that "fame is a form□perhaps the worst form□ of comprehension."

On a slightly more complex level would be interpretation, an act of inferring meaning between the lines and taking other information into consideration. The narrator proves his astuteness as a reader at this level of Borges's hierarchy of reading when he points out that Menard's diatribe against Paul Valery "states the exact reverse of Menard's true opinion of Valery." Here, the narrator has read Menard's life against his written opinions in order to arrive at a more thorough understanding of his subject than a casual reader might derive. The narrator has taken Menard's personal context□his habits of mind□into consideration in his interpretation. Borges, whose father had gone blind and who very early in his life began to have vision problems that would lead to blindness, had personal reasons to value the skills of comprehension and interpretation in reading. With his weak eyesight, it was important for Borges to grasp what he read quickly, so as not to need a second reading. In this Borges became quite successful, developing his memory to retain ideas, languages, and whole passages of favorite texts. Almost everyone who met Borges remarked on his uncanny ability to recall passages from books he had read years ago in the course of conversation about other books. Interpretation requires memory as well as understanding.

One of Menard's inspirations involves an even higher level of reading than interpretation□"total identification" with the author. To accomplish total identification with a sixteenth-century Spanish author, the French Menard had to "learn Spanish, return to Catholicism, fight against the Moor or Turk, forget the history of Europe from 1602 to 1918" all in order to "*be* Miguel de Cervantes." As daunting an undertaking as this might seem, Menard dismissed it as "too easy." Rather than read his way to a total identification with Cervantes, Menard wanted to come to the *Quixote* "*through the experiences of Pierre Menard*." In other words, Menard wanted to retain his own identity while absorbing Cervantes' world view thoroughly enough to reproduce his writing. Menard's project is similar in some ways to the goals of the university literature

professor, who tries to understand authors in enough depth to explain their work. Borges, writing "Pierre Menard" as a young man, had no way of knowing that he would later become a university professor of English literature too! Soon literature professors were approaching Borges himself in this fashion. One of them, Borges scholar Daniel Balderston, spent fifteen years on the Menardian task of trying to read and learn everything that Borges would have read and known when he wrote his stories, including "Pierre Menard." Balderston wanted "to re- cover the fullness of Borges's knowledge of his historical knowledge at the time of [composing]." Like Menard, Balderston chose to retain his own identity, knowing that he could not create the innocence of Borges' knowledge, since intervening history affects his understanding. Balderston's research is a rehistoricization of Borges. The postmodern term "rehistoricization" also applies to Menard's goal, because he ostensibly succeeded in understanding Cervantes' world, his historical context, while maintaining the identity of Menard. Menard and Balderston are ideal readers, who do not lose their own selves through "total identification." They understand the writer's words within their historical context as well within the contemporary context, with different values and beliefs.

The second inspiration for Menard was "anachronism," an idea he gleaned from "one of those parasitic books that set Christ on a boulevard." Since Borges has not supplied a specific title and author of such a "parasitic book," critics have debated what book he had in mind. Balderston suggests Joyce's *Ulysses*, where Leopold Bloom is a quotidian Christ, while Emilio Carilla suggests a 1922 Argentine novel called *Jesus en Buenos Aires*. However, the question is irrelevant in the context of reading Borges' story, for the point is not the specific allusion but the concept behind it, in this case, the placing of a famous character into a radically unexpected context. Such allusions, nearly impossible to trace, appear throughout "Pierre Menard" and they catapult the reader into the highest category of the Borges hierarchy of reading, to create meaning from deliberate ambiguity. This is where the craft of writing merges with the art of reading. Whether or not the reader can verify the story's "fallacious attributions," he or she is forced to create a meaning. This is a form of joke played by Borges upon his readers, to frustrate coherence as a way to "enrich the slow and rudimentary art of reading." As critic John Frow put it, "Borges's 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*' is a perfectly serious joke that we are still learning how to take seriously." The casual (who takes Borges' word for it) as well as the inquisitive reader (who hunts down every reference) approach the text from different angles, but in either case must fabricate their own sense of his "deliberate anachronism and fallacious attributions." By considering "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" an essay/story about reading, the oxymoron of the two inspirations for Menard's project begins to make sense, too. One of the texts that inspired Menard was the Novalis "philological fragment" on total identification with the author□ in other words, a "perfect" reading. The other was a "parasitic book" that played with context□in other words, it disrupted the reader's expectations. Taking the two opposing concepts together, Borges seems to suggest that full understanding, epitomized by "total identification" and perfect understanding, is undesirable and inadequate, because the reader has to negotiate context, epitomized by the example of Christ taken out of his expected context. Borges could not have intended "Pierre Menard" to spawn the postmodern idea of the "death of the author," the concept that nothing new can be

written. On the contrary, Borges meant the readers of "Pierre Menard" to discover the "birth of the reader," the idea that it is readers who make the text, and not authors alone.

Source: Carole Hamilton, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Rader has published several articles on twentieth- century American and Latin American literature. In this essay, he discusses Borges' innovative style and his postmodernist tendencies, despite the fact that he was engaging in postmodernist techniques before the term was ever coined.

Unfortunately, when scholars and readers think of Jorge Luis Borges, they do not think of a funny man. Typically, people characterize Borges and his work as abstract, philosophical, difficult, enigmatic, labyrinthine, but rarely humorous and playful. In "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," Borges is at his best because while the story meets all of the standard Borges criteria mentioned above, it is also one of his funniest pieces. Its utter absurdity, its creative form, its textuality, and its lack of traditional narrativity mark it as a classic postmodern text; however, the concept of postmodernism had yet to be articulated when Borges was working on the story in the early 1950s. In this way, the story is a pioneering text, one way ahead of its time, in part because of its awareness of itself as a text. At no point are we ever to believe that the text is "reality." We are always certain that the document before us is just that, a document, a description, not a representation of events. In fact, Borges has established his career on writing short stories that are not really stories□they don't have a traditional plot. There is no beginning, middle and end; no rising action, no denouement. In fact, many of his pieces are mock scholarly articles, fiction, but not stories. Such is the case with "Pierre Menard." The story is, in fact, a giant trick, a ruse, a parody of the kind of literary criticism that the narrator of the story is himself engaging in, a prophetic parody of exactly the kind of article you are reading at this very moment.

In his essay for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Alberto Julian Perez identifies the "creation of stories whose principal objective is to deal with critical, literary, or aesthetic problems" as one of two traits that distinguish Borges' art. Without question, this motif is the primary engine driving "Pierre Menard." The other, according to Perez, is the "development of plots that communicate elaborate and complex ideas that are transformed into the main thematic base of the story." In other words, Borges makes his ideas the central character in his works, not human beings. Even though the story deals with a fictional writer named Pierre Menard, Borges' text does not engage the life of Menard; it's really not about him. Rather, it is a reading of his most intriguing work, an unfinished manuscript copy of *Don Quixote*. Of course, Menard is not the original author of *Don Quixote*; Miguel de Cervantes wrote that lengthy tome over 300 years ago. Yet, in 1934, Menard sets out to write the *Quixote* as well: "He did not want to compose another *Quixote*□ which is easy□but *the Quixote itself*. . .[h]is admirable intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide□word for word and line for line□ with those of Miguel de Cervantes." Through his narrator, a Menard apologist, Borges proceeds to explain how Menard achieved this peculiar and somewhat ridiculous feat and to argue why Menard's version, though identical to Cervantes', is superior. Thus, the story brings into its own textuality all of the literary critical apparatus one would use to analyze, classify, explicate and explain it. In other words, Borges shows the reader how to be a literary critic of one of his own stories.

In his overview of "Pierre Menard" for *Short Stories for Students*, Greg Barnhisel claims that Borges "is a writer of ideas, and it is ideas that drive his fictions." Borges' idea in "Pierre Menard" is that a text accumulates the ideas and movements and philosophies and cultural weight of the era in which it was written. In one of the most famous passages of all of Borges' work, the excited narrator compares Menard's *Quixote* with Cervantes' *Quixote*:

> It is a revelation to compare Menard's *Don Quixote* with Cervantes'. The latter, for example, wrote (part one, chapter nine):
>
> ". . .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."
>
> Written in the seventeenth century, written by the "lay genius" Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand 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 counselor."
>
> History, the *mother* of truth: the idea is astounding.

This is a hilarious passage. The excerpts are identical. Yet, because they were written at entirely different moments in history, each text is imbued with the various events and concepts that have informed that moment. Borges notes that Menard was a contemporary of William James and links Menard's text with the provocative and influential ideas generating from James' philosophy of pragmatism. Knowing this history, one is forced to read Menard's text in that light. No such philosophical movements existed when Cervantes was writing; thus, as the narrator informs us, "Menard's fragmentary *Quixote* is more subtle than Cervantes'." According to the narrator, Cervantes' text is mired in the rather dull history of Spain around 1600 and cannot evoke or signify anything that has happened since. However, because Menard is a genius, and because his text appears in the early part of the twentieth century, then his words resonate with the hum of modernity, the inspiration of psychology, the radical dicta of Nietzsche.

Not only does the content of the texts alter from author to author, so does the impact of the style. Our narrator finds Menard's style affected, archaic. The language is mired in the past and seems alien. On the other hand, Cervantes' Spanish is easy and reflects the tone and vocabulary of the Spanish of his time. Still, despite this setback, the narrator boldly asserts that even though "Cervantes' text and Menard's are verbally identical. . .the second is almost infinitely richer." Borges is often criticized for writing a literature that does not speak to the political and social events of his time, and while

some of these charges are warranted, in his own cryptic way, he suggests in this story that literature is an extension of the time and culture in which it was written. One cannot separate a text from the culture that produced it, and though Borges never addresses the repressive politics of the Peron government, he is aware of the ways in which history is as much an author of a text as the person whose name is attached to the text□not surprisingly, a stance also held by Menard in his version of the *Quixote*.

Traditionally, students, writers, scholars and teachers have distinguished between "creative" writing and literary criticism. One is artistic, the other, scholarly. One is art, the other comments on art. Borges complicates these distinctions in "Pierre Menard" not so much through Menard's project but through his project, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*." A former librarian and scholar, Borges published many essays that employed the same language and analytical tools that our nameless narrator employs in the story, and that both you and I are employing in an attempt to make sense of Borges' text. For instance, the narrator provides us with a very detailed bibliography (19 entries) of Menard's work. No doubt, you have had to construct such a bibliography; however, in this case, every single entry is a fiction. None of the texts mentioned exists. What's more, the story is com plete with footnotes, adding to the legitimacy of the scholarship of the piece. This obsession with textuality (the notion of texts within texts) is a classic characteristic of postmodernism, of which Borges was perhaps the most important precursor. Another way in which "Pierre Menard" predicts postmodernism lies in its implicit critique of tenets of the New Criticism. For the New Critics, the author, his or her era, political and social events, biography and intertextuality were anathema. The only thing that mattered was the text itself, the text's autotelism. In fact, the New Critics wanted to remove the author from the text altogether. Of course, Borges' text suggests just the opposite. The text's very meaning is dependent on the author and the culture in which the text is produced. Finally, Borges engages in a double parody in the story, another important aspect of postmodernism. He not only parodies *Don Quixote*, he parodies the act of interpreting all literary texts. The most postmodern of gestures is to call your own project into question. Borges does this brilliantly here.

Though Barnhisel and others question Borges' use of "piggybacking"□Menard latches on to Cervantes, Borges latches on to "Menard," critics, including myself, latch on to Borges, and you, perhaps, latch on to us□he reminds us of the degree to which all texts and all projects are interconnected. In a lecture toward the end of his life, Borges claimed that the audience was the true author of his stories. By that he meant that through our own individual interpretation of a text, we "create" the nuances of that text. Thus, it would make Borges happy to know that in some way, we are all authors of the *Quixote*.

Source: Dean Rader, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay on Jorge Luis Borges's Pierre Menard, Author of Quixote*, Michael J. Wreen argues that Borges's story is a sustained parody presenting an ironic commentary on the process of creative activity as a necessary but ultimately impossible task.*

In a recent article, "Once Is Not Enough?", I argued that a book word-for-word identical with Cervantes' *Quixote* wouldn't be a new *Quixote*, numerically distinct from Cervantes', if it were produced in the manner described in Borges' short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote."* Menard's novel would simply be Cervantes', I tried to show, although admittedly produced in a very odd way. But philosophical issues (such as the individuation of works of art) are one thing, literary interpretation quite another. In this paper, I'll be offering a comprehensive interpretation of Borges' story and arguing, against a number of critics, that "Pierre Menard" is philosophically correct, i.e., that the correct interpretation of Borges' story doesn't have Menard as the author of a new *Quixote*. Even more importantly, I'll be arguing that the story is an extremely penetrating one, with philosophical depths as yet unexplored, although its main interest, metaphysical and otherwise, lies in a direction other than the individuation of works of art. These being my main theses, let me also issue an advance warning that my approach is itself more than a little philosophical.

Critical Essay #4

Given my purely philosophical examination of the duplicate *Quixote* case, the most direct way to approach Borges' story would be to ask, Why on earth would anyone ever reproduce Cervantes' novel in the way that Menard does? But the more indirect route, and the one I'll be traveling here, is to marshal evidence bit by textual bit, all the while proceeding with the aim of constructing a unified and comprehensive interpretation. That methodology begs no critical questions, as the first one evidently does.

Structurally, "Pierre Menard" has three parts. In the first, the setting, dramatic voice, and mode of narration are established; the main character, Pierre Menard, is introduced; the prevailing tone is set; and a number of themes are broached. The story is cast in the form of an elaborate literary obituary and memoir written by an unnamed friend and admirer of Menard. Supposedly, it's an official, formal assessment and appreciation of the great man, an intellectual and a figure of stupendous, even revolutionary, but unfortunately unknown, literary achievement. Superficially, the piece resembles the sort of literary honorarium found not so much in professional journals as in the self-appointed flagships of high art, i.e., in literary magazines with pretensions to high culture. We soon discover, however, that the narrator's assessment may be somewhat biased and skewed□that he may be, in other words, an unreliable narrator. His first few sentences show him to be patronizing and bullying, and within two paragraphs his political conservatism, hauteur, and condescending attitude toward any and all who don't share his convictions are made evident. After first taking an altogether gratuitous snipe at Protestants and Masons, he proceeds to name-drop a title or two, in order, he says, to establish his authority to write an assessment of Menard and his oeuvre, but actually to call attention to himself and his aristocratic connections. Moreover, his prose style is pretentious, bombastic, and affected, and smacks more than a little of the fourth-rate symbolist:

> One might say that only yesterday we gathered before his [Menard's] final monument, amidst the lugubrious cypresses, and already Error tries to tarnish his Memory. . . . Decidedly, a brief rectification is unavoidable (Borges).

Clearly, this is not an assessment to be trusted. But even more clearly, and even more importantly, this is fiction, not non-fiction, despite the obituary/ literary-memoir format. No piece of non-fiction would ever be as blatantly prejudiced, arrogant, or inflated as "Pierre Menard." Moreover, given only what has been said so far, it's quite probably a parody of a certain kind of litterateur and literary document, and quite probably a story whose prevailing tone is ironic. If that is so, what we should be on the lookout for is exactly the opposite of what we see glittering brightly on the surface. In fact if that's the case, if we don't look any farther than the surface, we're liable to miss what the story is really all about. Taking the story to be an argument for the numerical distinctness of Menard's *Quixote* would be to be blind to the story's pervasive irony, in particular that regarding Menard's creative activity.

Critical Essay #5

Part one of the story concludes with a slightly annotated list of Menard's "visible" work. From the list we learn that Menard is a very minor symbolist poet and an intellectual with a number of disparate, narrow, and highly idiosyncratic interests. Menard has published a sonnet and written a sonnet cycle "for the Baroness de Bacourt," and has done extensive work in literary theory and criticism. In addition to writing "an invective against Paul Valery," an invective which expresses "the exact opposite of his true opinion of Valery," he has

> written a monograph on the possibility of constructing a poetic vocabulary of concepts which would not be synonyms or periphrases of those which make up our everyday language, "but rather ideal objects created according to convention and essentially designed to satisfy poetic needs."

He's also examined the "essential metric laws of French prose," as well as replied to "Luc Durtain (who denied the existence of such laws), [using] examples [culled] from Luc Durtain['s own work]." His other achievements include having fashioned a "determined analysis of the 'syntactical customs' of Toulet," having translated Quevedo's *Aguja de navegar cultos* and Ruy Lopez's book on chess, *Libro de la invencion liberal y arte del juego del axedrez*, and having transposed the maligned Valery's *Le Cimetiere marin* into alexandrines. But various obscure corners of philosophy were also peeking places for Menard. He composed work sheets for a monograph on George Boole's symbolic logic, and wrote "a monograph on 'certain connections or affinities' between the thought of Descartes, Leibniz and John Wilkins," a monograph on Leibniz's *Characteristica universalis*, a monograph on Raymond Lully's *Ars magna generic,* and a book, *Les problemes d'un probleme,* on the different solutions to the problem of Achilles and the tortoise. Rounding out the list of Menard's "visible" achievements are a number of other odd items: "a technical article on the possibility of improving the game of chess [by] eliminating one of the rook's pawns," an article in which Menard "proposes, recommends, discusses, and finally rejects the innovation"; "a preface to the *Catalogue* of an exposition of lithographs by Carolus Hourcade"; "a 'definition' of the Countess de Bagnoregio, in the 'victorious volume'. . . published annually by this lady to rectify the inevitable falsifications of journalists"; and "a manuscript list of verses which owe their efficacy to their punctuation."

The picture drawn here is both consistent and complete: Menard is a precieux, a turn-of-the-century decadent, a symbolist, and a snobbish cultivator of social connections. So far, then, he's a man rather like the narrator. But he's a decadent and symbolist of a rather more complex sort than the narrator, since he's also a poet and a very peculiar and desiccated academic as well. Moreover, while academics and poets are known for their eccentricities and narrow and peculiar interests, Menard's quantitative differences from other poets and academics in these respects make for a qualitative difference. For the list is little more than an extended catalogue of arrant academic twaddle, of

intellectual pettiness without a point. It thus shows that Menard, unlike other poets and academics, has completely lost sight of what is truly important and interesting about poetry and intellectual matters, and thus lost contact with the real world, the world that gives poetry and academic matters their value in the first place. His, instead, is an autotelic universe, a universe circumscribed and defined by interests fabricated by his own exhausted intellect. His vitality, as a real man and a thinker, has diminished to the point that his studies are well-nigh useless, and he himself simply a curious life form, culturally speaking. No wonder Borges said that the list is "a diagram of [Menard's] mental history" and thus that "il y a chez lui [Menard] un sens de l'inutilite de la litterature." The theme that Barrenechea finds in so many of Borges' works, that of the writer as noncreative, is present in "Pierre Menard" from the start, in both the narrator's introduction and the catalogue of Menard's "achievements."

Critical Essay #6

The second part of the story is a description and explanation of what the narrator regards as far and away Menard's greatest accomplishment, invisible though it may be. "I turn now," he says, "to [Menard's] other work: the subterranean, the interminably heroic, the peerless. And□such are the capacities of man!□the unfinished." Yes, such are the capacities of man that men don't finish their work. But small ironies such as this aside, what is perhaps the "most significant [work] of our time," the narrator tells us, "consists of the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of the first part of Don Quixote and a fragment of chapter twenty-two." Menard has written a *Quixote*, or at least part of a *Quixote*, that is word-for-word identical with Cervantes' but not identical with Cervantes'. To say as much is to affirm an absurdity, the narrator admits, but Menard is capable of the absurd, capable of achieving the impossible.

Here, for the first time, another major theme is introduced, that of literary creation as necessarily an impossible task, a theme consistent with but stronger than the uselessness of literature. In addition, one of the themes hinted at earlier, the logical inseparability of the man of letters□whether reader or writer□from the literary work□whether fictional or nonfictional□is explicitly drawn out and underscored. For since Menard symbolizes the man of letters, literature and litterateur fuse in Borges' story: the man, Menard, has no more reality than the performance of the literary task. Indeed, he lives within the task, Borges tells us, since he lives within books alone. The written word eventually makes those who live by it part of it, Borges seems to say□ probably not a little a propos of himself. As I'll try to show below in section XII, even this strong thesis will eventually need strengthening.

Menard was inspired by two very different sources to undertake his "impossible" task: a "philological fragment by Novalis [whoever he might be, if anyone at all]. . .which outlines the theme of total identification with a given author, [and]. . .one of those parasitic books which situate Christ on a boulevard, Hamlet on La Canebiere or Don Quixote on Wall Street." Literature draws upon literature, both in Novalis and in the parasitic book, and thus the theme of the autotelic nature of literature and the literary life, here again represented by Menard, is reinforced. Menard's life-literature's life□is not only essentially parasitic upon the extraliterary world; at its worst, in the terminal stages of its inevitable decline, it is parasitic upon itself, unable to draw inspiration from anything other than itself. The result is an anemic and decadent literature, both uninspired and uninspiring. In the case of Menard, in fact, the disease has spread even further: he was "inspired" by two pieces of literature, one a fragment of an essay, one probably a novel, which are themselves already parasitic pieces of literature, dependent for their existence on the prior existence of literature in general (the essay fragment) and specific literary works (the novel). Menard's undertaking, to replicate□"duplicate" would be more accurate□an already existent literary work, the Quixote, was itself inspired by two pieces of literature already parasitic on literature. Hence once again, but at a new level, the theme of the autotelic nature of literature□or, what is the same thing, Menard's autotelic world and the autotelic nature of his mind. But hence also a new thesis: this is a world in which, in the long run, the distinction between author and

fictional character is only a nominal distinction, only a distinction of words□which, of course, is the only kind of distinction there could be in such a world.

Critical Essay #7

Following a statement of Menard's intended project, the narrator lets Menard speak for himself, quoting a letter he supposedly wrote him. "'My intent is no more than astonishing,'" Menard wrote, "'The final term in a theological or metaphysical demonstration□the objective world, God, causality, the forms of the universe□is no less previous and common than my famed novel. The only difference is that the philosophers publish their intermediary stages of their labor in pleasant volumes and I have resolved to do away with those stages.' In truth," as the narrator says, continuing the story where Menard left off, "not one worksheet remains to bear witness to his years of effort."

This is parody once again, only this time concerning the inflated self-images of artistes and assorted defenders of the intellectual realm. It's also a send-up of the sort of Manifesto of Grand Artistic Purpose that self-righteous guardians of high culture are usually only too glad to issue. "Manifesto of Grand Delusion" would be more accurate in most cases, though, but especially apt in this one, because the parody and irony here are particularly pointed: whether he knows it or not, Menard's "famed novel" is famed for no other reason than that it is Cervantes'. I say this because (1) to intend to produce a novel word-for-word identical with one that already exists; (2) to use word-for-word identity with it as the standard for completion of your task; and (3) to rely, as Menard evidently did, on his memory of that novel in producing his text□ for not only had he read Cervantes' book (admittedly, many years past), he had to look at Cervantes' text in order to make sure that his 'rough drafts' were indeed rough drafts (that is, not word-for-word identical with the relevant parts of Cervantes') and thus undoubtedly re-approached his job with some memory of Cervantes' text in mind□to do all of that is just to reproduce Cervantes' text in a very roundabout, strange way. Given the context, then, the irony is more pointed than a mere parody of the sort of person or document in question would otherwise be. Menard is a ridiculous figure not only because of his inflated self-image, self-congratulatory and self-satisfied manner, and pompous prose posing, but because his studious seriousness is put in the service of a logically impossible task. Again, this is the theme of literary creation as an impossible task, but again there is an enrichment: here the task really is literally impossible.

That, of course, didn't deter Menard. Various plans to accomplish his objective occurred to him. Rejected as too easy was to "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." But since doing that is logically impossible, Menard's proposed modus operandi is, with an irony that is perhaps too heavy, hardly too easy: being numerically distinct people is logically impossible, just as squaring the circle, or writing a *Quixote* numerically distinct from Cervantes' while exactly duplicating the book, intending to so duplicate it, and checking your production for accuracy against it is. This, however, the unnamed narrator readily admits: "[But being Cervantes is] impossible! my reader will say. Granted, but the undertaking was impossible from the very beginning and of all the impossible ways of carrying it out, this was the least interesting." That the method and task itself are impossible is conceded by the narrator, but being the spiritual kin of Menard, he rejects the plan because it's not interesting, not because it's not

possible. That is the sort of solipsistic and autotelic universe that the narrator and Menard inhabit.

Critical Essay #8

The plan that Menard decided upon was "to go on being Pierre Menard and to reach the *Quixote* through the experiences of Pierre Menard." "'My undertaking is not difficult, essentially,'" Menard wrote to the narrator. "'I should only have to be immortal to carry it out.'" But this self-absorbed posturing conceals yet another contradiction. Since it's impossible—physically, not logically this time—to be immortal, the "undertaking" is just the opposite of "essentially easy," and Menard, like the narrator, is anything but rational for brushing aside the contradiction as of little moment. Besides, it's not at all clear that immortality would guarantee completion of the task. If the task is logically impossible (given Menard's methods), then eternity guarantees only never-ending frustration.

The narrator is not essentially different from Menard. He shares his delusions of literary grandeur, and prefers specious but personally satisfying rationalization to common sense. Again like Menard, he prefers a world of pleasant literary fantasies to one of cold literary—and literal—facts. "Some nights past," he says,

> while leafing through chapter XXVI [of the *Quixote*]—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." This happy conjunction of a spiritual and a physical adjective brought to my mind a verse by Shakespeare which we discussed one afternoon: "Where a malignant and turbaned Turk . . . ."

But to interpret passages not written by someone as if they were and to delight in the thoughts and emotions thereby evoked is to abandon hard, cold reality—including the hard, cold reality of literary interpretation—for a dream world of delicious delusions, and to do so, in this case, in an especially bizarre and fatuous fashion. For what the narrator is implicitly doing here is attributing a style to Menard and then reading Cervantes against the backdrop of that style. He is, in other words, reading Cervantes as a logically posterior writer and stylist. Philosophically speaking, this is worse than interpretation turned inside out. There is no logically independent style of Menard that can act as a backdrop, because no logically independent work of his exists. The only work there is is Cervantes'. Hence it is logically impossible to read Cervantes the way the narrator does, much less to savor, as he evidently does, that reading. Cervantes is not the logically posterior writer because there isn't, and couldn't be, any logically anterior one.

Icing for the cake here, adding to the perversity of the narrator's delight, is his aesthetic insensitivity. To quote Shakespeare's line "Where a malignant and turbaned Turk . . ." with approval is to love The Bard not wisely but too well. The line is undoubtedly one of the thousand that Jonson would have blotted, for the conjunction of the adjectives is anything but delicate or aesthetically subtle. Rather, it's ludicrous and unintentionally humorous, the literary kin, aesthetically speaking, of Dickens' famous line about leaving

the room in a flood of tears and a sedan chair. Drawing attention to Menard's□really, Cervantes'□"exceptional phrase" regarding "dolorous and humid Echo" by comparing it with Shakespeare's blunder is to draw attention to its obvious defects, two of which, in addition to the one already hinted at in regard to the line from Shakespeare, are its decadent languidness and vapidity. Unlike Othello, the narrator is easily wrought, both logically and aesthetically; but like Othello, being wrought, he's perplexed in the extreme.

Recovering from the listless digression regarding Menard and Shakespeare he's fallen into, the narrator asks, Why did Menard choose to re-create the *Quixote*? Why the *Quixote* rather than some other book? Menard himself provided the answer, the narrator tells us, in a letter he wrote him. The *Quixote* is "'not. . . inevitable,'" he said there; it's "'a contingent book; the *Quixote* is unnecessary. I can premeditate writing it, I can write it, without falling into a tautology.'"

This is simply philosophical confusion. Strictly speaking, as I've already argued, Menard can't write the *Quixote* at all□not without falling into a (logical) contradiction. In that sense, of course, he can certainly avoid "falling into a tautology," contradictions being just the opposite of tautologies. But writing the Quixote□or anything else□ and actually falling into a tautology? What would it be like to do that? What, in other words, does Menard mean by "tautology"? The context here is replete with philosophical terms, "contingent," "unnecessary," and "inevitable" among them, and that fact, in conjunction with Menard's documented philosophic interests and background, would make it seem that the term is also being used in a philosophical sense. Philosophically speaking, tautologies are logically compound statements which are truth-functionally true, that is, true under all assignments of truth values to their component parts. Tautologies in this sense are necessarily true, and therefore true in every possible or imaginable universe. They're not contingently true, not true in this but not every possible or imaginable universe. Menard's dichotomy of tautologies, necessity, and the inevitable on the one hand, and contingencies and what he can imagine the universe not containing□ such as the *Quixote*□on the other, thus seems secure and well founded.

But it isn't, not really. Remember, in this sense a tautology is a statement, and no statement of the form "X wrote Y" or "Y exists," where X is a person and Y a book, is truth-functionally true, or even analytically true (true solely in virtue of the meanings of the terms found in it). Every statement of either form couldn't be anything but nontautologous, and thus contingently true, if true at all. There's simply nothing on the other side of Menard's implied contrast, then, no statement concerning the existence of a book or authorship that's tautologous. Consequently, the statements "The *Quixote* exists" and "Cervantes is the author of the *Quixote*" are non-tautologous, just as Menard has them. That's hardly enlightening or surprising, however, and the truth of Menard's claim, given the similar nontautologous nature of all statements of the same form, thus provides no reason for choosing the *Quixote* over any other book.

But maybe this way of reading Menard, a technical and highly philosophical one, isn't the right way to read him. Menard does say that he can't imagine the universe without Poe's line, "Ah, bear in mind this garden was enchanted!" or without the *Bateau Ivre* or

the *Ancient Mariner,* and the statement "The *Quixote* exists" is supposed to contrast with them. But how? "Poe wrote the line 'Ah, bear . . .'", "The *Bateau* lure exists," and "The *Ancient Mariner* exists" are one and all non-tautologous and contingent. But once again, so is "The *Quixote* exists." And though it's easy to imagine the universe without the statement about the *Quixote* being true, it's equally easy to imagine the universe without the others being true as well, contrary to what Menard says. Besides, soon after making his remarks about the *Quixote*'s being contingent and contrasting Cervantes' work with other "inevitable" ones, Menard goes on to say that "to compose the *Quixote* at the beginning of the seventeenth century was a reasonable undertaking, necessary and perhaps even unavoidable," thus flatly contradicting himself. No master of logic he, Menard.

Perhaps, though, despite the philosophical context he himself has established, and despite his own philosophical interests and background, Menard doesn't intend "tautology" in a philosophical sense at all; perhaps he means it simply in its everyday sense, as a needless repetition of something, whether a statement, a question, a command, or whatever. Menard's main idea, then, would be that he wouldn't be needlessly repeating Cervantes in undertaking a new *Quixote,* though repeating him he would certainly be. Now, however, the notion of inevitability can come into play□and can come to Menard's rescue, even. "Inevitable" similarly doesn't mean necessary in any logical or causal sense, or any other sense common to philosophical discourse, Menard could say; rather, it means aesthetically necessary. Menard's claim would then be that he wouldn't be repeating Cervantes needlessly, in that he wouldn't be repeating him in an aesthetically unnecessary way. There's room, aesthetically speaking, for a new *Quixote*, Menard thinks, and that's why Cervantes' work is contingent□and that, in fact, is what he, Menard, means by "contingent": aesthetic possibility. According to him, Cervantes' *Quixote* has made new aesthetic possibilities possible, including the possibility of a work word-forword identical with it but numerically and aesthetically distinct from it. By way of contrast, the aesthetic possibilities of romantic literature have been exhausted, the death knell having been sounded by the decadents. That's why Menard mentions Poe's line, the *Ancient Mariner*, and the *Bateau Ivre* all in the same breath. No new aesthetic possibilities remain for romantic literature, for its successor has exhausted them all. Hence, for his crowning literary achievement the *Quixote* is perfect, while romantic literature not even possible.

While this generous interpretation of Menard is consistent with his remarks and, moreover, is in keeping with what we know of the man□I think in particular of the aesthetic sensibilities revealed in the catalogue of his "visible achievements"□it's as problematic as the others. The central difficulty is not so much the obviously vague and unexplained concept of aesthetic possibility as the claim that it's possible for Menard to create an aesthetically distinct *Quixote* but not an aesthetically distinct *Ancient Mariner*. Numerical distinctness may ensure aesthetic distinctness, but aesthetic distinctness□ itself bound up with the concept of aesthetic possibility, it would seem□is predicated on the logically prior notion of numerical distinctness, and not vice versa. Thus aesthetic distinctness presupposes numerical distinctness, and so even on this interpretation of Menard's remarks, it must be possible for him to create a numerically distinct *Quixote* but not a numerically distinct *Mariner*. Even waiving the objection that creating the

former isn't really possible in this case, why isn't the latter possible if the former is? If it's possible to create a new *Quixote* in the way Menard envisages, why not a new *Mariner*? He supplies no reason for distinguishing the cases as far as the individuation of works of art is concerned, and logically and ontologically they certainly seem on a par. That's a very good reason for thinking that they can't be distinguished. As far as the main issue is concerned, then, the conclusion that should be drawn is that if there is a reason for Menard's choosing the *Quixote* over every other book□and I think there is, and will be discussing it in due course□it has nothing to do with the argument Menard himself supplies, regardless of how generously it's interpreted. Instead, the passage about his choice of the *Quixote* should be read in light of what we already know about Menard himself. So read, it doesn't function philosophically, since its purpose isn't to provide us with insights on the nature of the aesthetic; rather, it functions literarily, so to speak, since its purpose is deepen our understanding of the precieuse and provide yet another ironic fix on the pathetic, illogical, solipsistic, and academic, in the worst sense of the word, character that he is.

Critical Essay #9

The third major section of the story is partly a critical evaluation of Menard's *Quixote*, partly a panegyric of the man, and partly a theoretical reflection on the aesthetic lessons taught us by him. Panegyric and theoretical reflection are inextricably bound up with each other, however, and thus will be considered together below. Also, the third section is far and away the richest of the three, from a philosophical point of view, and so a fair amount of space will need to be devoted to it in order to do it justice. First, then, the narrator's critical assessment of Menard's magnum opus.

Having detailed how difficult it was to pull off the trick of writing a new *Quixote* at all, the narrator proceeds to argue that the new *Quixote* is aesthetically superior to the original. Menard's book is "more subtle" than Cervantes', for instance, because Menard doesn't

> oppose . . . to the fictions of chivalry the tawdry provincial reality of his country; Menard selects as his 'reality' the land of Carmen during the century of Lepanto and Lope de Vega. . . . He neglects altogether local color. This disdain points to a new conception of the historical novel [and] condemns Salammbo, with no possibility of appeal.>

But even if Menard's were a new *Quixote* I doubt that it would be quite so easy to "condemn" Flaubert's novel. Salammbo's place in the historical record is a little too secure to be dislodged by any single event in the literary world, even the mysterious appearance of the *Quixote* (or a new *Quixote*). But the narrator's remark here is probably just critical hyperbole, not intended to be taken literally. He may just mean that Menard's achievement casts a new light on Flaubert's work, locating it in the historical development of the novel in an altogether new and unexpected fashion. To which the proper reply is, True enough□but only if Menard's book is indeed a new one. If it's not and the reader is intended to know as much, the narrator's remark will need to be reinterpreted in the context of the story as a whole. Independent evidence I've already marshalled in fact suggests all three: (1) that the novel wouldn't be a new one; (2) that the reader is intended to know as much; and thus (3) that the narrator's critical remarks should be understood ironically. We have a fairly complete mental history of Menard and a slightly annotated bibliography of his published work to draw upon in interpreting just what his literary capacities are, and we have something similar, first hand, in the case of the narrator, namely the evidence provided by his own prose in the story. All such evidence, from the first paragraph of the story onwards, suggests an ironic reading of the argument for Menard's greater subtlety.

So does the passage itself. For at least two reasons, to argue for Menard's greater subtlety on the basis of his having selected the land of Carmen during the century of Lepanto and Lope de Vega as his "reality" is just the sort of nonsense that is an strong indication of irony. First, since Menard's overarching intention was simply to produce a text word-for-word identical with Cervantes', he didn't select, in the sense the narrator

seems to have in mind, namely intend to write about, the land of Carmen. . . . Even if, as is very likely, Menard knew that the country and century depicted in Cervantes was the land of Carmen. . . , that doesn't entail that he intended to write about the land of Carmen. . . . (When I walk home from school, I know that my shoes will wear down a little bit, but that doesn't mean that I intend that they wear down a little bit.) On the contrary, the odds are very high that, wrapped up in his imitative task as he was, concentrating on reproducing Cervantes' text word-for-word, thoughts, much less intentions, respecting the land of Carmen. . . never crossed his mind. The narrator's saying that Menard selected the land of Carmen. . . , in the sense of intending to write about, is merely another instance of his abandoning a person in reality for a pleasant projection in a dream world.

Second, contrary to the narrator's suggestion, the "A selects B" construction is what contemporary philosophers would call referentially transparent. Roughly speaking, a sentence is referentially transparent if and only if codesignative terms can be substituted for each another in it salva veritate, that is, without change of truth value. If "Menard selected the land of Carmen." is true, and the land of Carmen. . . is Spain in the 17th century, then "Menard selected Spain in the 17th century" is true. So if Spain in the 17th century is the land and time that Cervantes selected and wrote about□which it certainly is□then Menard and Cervantes selected and wrote about the same land in the same century□ they selected and wrote about the same thing, in other words. Thus philosophical analysis upholds the commonsense conviction that, despite the narrator's evident delectation, Menard can't be distinguished from Cervantes on the basis of what he selected to write about. The argument for Menard's greater subtlety is a sham, then, and the narrator merely spinning wheels in a fantasy land of his□ and Menard's□own creation. The literary effect of this, given the immediacy of its impact and given the narrator's stilted and overly cultured means of expression, is pitched but merry irony. But the acme of irony is yet to come.

Critical Essay #10

Before it does, though, an ironic flourish of a different sort is cleverly drawn. "It is well known," says our bombastic narrator,

> that Don Quixote. . . decided the debate [on arms and letters] against arms and in favor of letters. Cervantes was a former soldier: his verdict is understandable. But that Pierre Menard's *Don Quixote*—a contemporary of *La Trahison des clercs* and Bertrand Russell—should fall prey to such nebulous sophistries!

But the nebulous sophistries are in the passage itself, not the *Quixote*—or even any *Quixote*, including, arguendo, the one written by Menard. If Don Quixote decided the debate in favor of arms, it certainly doesn't follow that Cervantes did, though the narrator asserts as much without argument. Considered per se, inferences from what a fictional character says to what the author of the fiction believes, are notoriously shaky and unreliable. More importantly, the inference the narrator makes here is facilitated by the fact that he identifies Cervantes and Quixote, and thus blurs the distinction between reality and fiction, a distinction he and Menard have been attacking, consciously or not, since the advent of their literary careers. As I'll try to show below, in the long run Borges himself is attacking the same distinction, though not unwittingly, and with deliberate literary and philosophical purpose in mind. Recognition of gorges' intentions in this regard is essential to understanding his overarching purpose in the story.

For the present, however, we need only note that the narrator's attempted removal of the barrier between fact and fiction, implicit in his identification of Cervantes and Don Quixote, is continued in his remark about "Menard's *Don Quixote*." Even granting for the sake of argument that Menard's is not Cervantes' *Quixote*, the claim that his *Quixote* is a contemporary of Bertrand Russell is still, on many philosophers' views, simply a category mistake: the former is a fictional character, and thus in one logical category; the latter is a real man, and thus in quite another. That being the case, it's nonsense, strictly speaking, these philosophers would maintain, to regard the two as existing within the same time frame, and thus nonsense to regard them as contemporaries. Again, the narrator assimilates fact to fiction—or vice versa; it makes no difference within the bounds of the story itself. The concept of a category mistake being a much disputed one, however, the charge of nonsense probably shouldn't be pressed. Still, the narrator is far from off the logical hook. For even if comparing fictional characters and real people is sometimes possible, in this case the comparison remains logically egregious. Menard's *Quixote* is obviously not a contemporary of Russell: Russell was born in 1872; Don Quixote, even, by the narrator's admission, in Menard's "new" story, lived in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Rather, Menard's *Quixote* is a contemporary of Cervantes' *Quixote*. Since Menard, from what we can infer from the story, was born in approximately 1870, he and not his Quixote is the true contemporary of Russell. Once again—and irrespective of the contestable charge of a category mistake—there is a logical, indeed a metaphysical, confusion of the fictional and the factual, of character

and author. The narrator identifies Menard with the fictional character he created, just as he previously identified Cervantes with the fictional character he created.

But the confusion is compounded and thus enriched here, in the second case, for Menard's *Quixote* is not only said to be a contemporary of Russell but of a book, *La Trahison des clercs*. The notion of a category mistake thus begs to be granted admission for the third time, but even if the request is again denied, the idea of people and books being contemporaries is an inherently odd one□until, that is, the idea is coupled with an understanding of the narrator's and Menard's persistent inability to distinguish fact from fiction. Given an open door between the two realms, the most natural comparison is with the door itself, namely a book. The supreme irony topping the whole thing off, of course, is that the conflation of the distinction between the real and fictional exists only within a piece of fiction itself, Borges' story.

But to return to the main issue: since the narrator's argument for an evaluatively important difference between the "two" *Quixotes* □a difference concerning the aesthetic quality of the passages favoring arms over letters□rests on a number of logical and metaphysical confusions, there is no good reason for thinking the two different in that respect. There is thus no difference that needs to be explained□and what the narrator does next is tender an explanation□and thus also no basis for thinking that the conclusion that he immediately draws from his "finding" concerning arms versus letters, the conclusion that Menard's text is "infinitely richer" than Cervantes', is anything but wishful thinking. Indeed, even if the narrator had made a good case for his claim respecting arms versus letters, the argument would still be poor one, the inductive leap from a single piece of evidence to an outrageously strong conclusion respecting infinite richness being one of several light years.

Critical Essay #11

But the narrator has other arguments to offer. Compare, he says, the following passage from Cervantes:

. . . 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. . .

with this one from Menard:

. . . 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. . . .

Since Cervantes wrote in the 17th century, his passage is "mere rhetorical praise of history." The passage from Menard, on the other hand, originating in the 20th century as it did, is "astounding." Menard takes history to be the mother of truth, not "an inquiry into [truth's] origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened. The final phrases□exemplar and advisor to the present, and the future's counselor□ are brazenly pragmatic." Vast differences of an evaluative nature exist between the two books, then.

But it's hard to shake the feeling that the argument here is itself more sophistical than any of the "nebulous sophistries" found in the Quixote. The narrator telling us that two passages of very distinctive prose, passages which are word-forword identical, differ radically in their aesthetic properties□that beggars comparison with Ionesco's psychotic professor telling his pupil that instead of saying "The roses of my grandmother are as yellow as my grandfather who was Asiatic" she is saying "The roses of my grandmother are as yellow as my grandfather who was Asiatic" (Ionesco). There has to be something wrong with the argument.

And there is. The imputed differences between the passages doesn't really depend so much on their being products of different time periods□though, admittedly, their being such could warrant interpreting them differently, even differently in aesthetically important ways□as on an equivocation in the narrator's reading of them. The crucial terms in both his glosses are "history" and, though only implicit in his reading of Cervantes, "truth." Depending on why the narrator thinks that the passage from Cervantes is mere rhetorical praise of history□ he doesn't tell us□the first and possibly the second of these terms are equivocated on.

One way to understand his claim about Cervantes is with "history" taken to denote those actual, concrete, (in the main) non-linguistic events and facts that occur or exist out there in the world. With "truth" being taken in its usual sense to denote a property of propositions, namely their correspondence with (again, in the main) extra-linguistic

event or fact, history is the mother of truth in that events and facts are logically prior to, and the metaphysical determinates of, the correspondence relation. Events and facts make, metaphysically, true propositions true. The other way to understand his claim about Cervantes is with "truth" taken in its common and colloquial sense of knowledge: "truth" is what we know to be true, in the first sense of the term. "History," then, understood in the sense just mentioned, would be the mother of truth in that our knowledge of what is the case would be logically and ontologically dependent upon the existence of those actual concrete events and facts out there in the world. "History" could even be taken in a second sense, in the sense of an oral or written record of history in the first sense of the term, and slightly weaker remarks of a similar nature would still hold good. Our knowledge of events and facts is dependent, as a matter of contingent fact, on "history" in the sense of an oral or written record. Any of these readings of Cervantes makes sense, but none will help the narrator escape the charge of equivocation.

The reason is that his reading of Menard takes "history" and/or "truth" in an altogether different sense (or senses). In claiming that Menard defines history as the origin of reality, and then going on to say that for Menard, historical truth□that is, history, in the first of the senses just identified□is what we judge to have happened, the narrator gives evidence for his claim that Menard's remark is astounding, no mere rhetorical praise of history. Why is it astounding? Because Menard's passage is budding pragmatism: what we judge to have happened determines, ontologically, what did happened. That's what the claim that history is the mother of truth amounts to. But notice that "history" here has to be understood in terms of what we judge to be the case□basically, the written or oral record□and not extra-linguistic, out-there, concrete reality. "History," then, is not to be understood in the sense that it probably should be in the passage from Cervantes, for there it had to do with extra-linguistic fact. Even on the reading of Cervantes on which "history" is taken as the written or oral record, an equivocation remains, since in his reading of Cervantes, "truth" has to be understood in the sense of knowledge, and the claim that history is the mother of truth read as a contingent claim which basically states that our knowledge of extra-linguistic events and facts is dependent, as a matter of contingent, causal fact, on the oral and written record. Obviously, the narrator means something much more philosophically significant than that in his reading of Menard, since he reads him as propounding a central tenet of pragmatism, that what is the case is determined by what we judge to be the case. An equivocation of some sort thus remains, no matter how the narrator's remarks are read, and no matter what argument is imputed him respecting his claim about Cervantes; and the most natural way to read him is with an equivocation on "history."

"What of that, though?" someone might object. "What is pejoratively identified as an equivocation might be simply reading one passage one way and another another, that's all. Even if the two passages are verbally identical, that doesn't necessarily mean that the narrator misinterpreted anything. Said on one occasion, 'I went to the bank' might mean that I took a trip to the financial institution; said on another, that I headed for the local fishing hole. No equivocation there, just correct interpretation. Why isn't the narrator doing just the same thing? After all, Cervantes lived way back when, Menard at

the turn of this century, and that seems to be the basis for his different interpretations. So what's really wrong with reading the passages as he does?"

In principle, this is a good objection—indeed, I've already agreed that two passages could be verbally identical yet differ markedly in meaning and aesthetic significance. I don't think that it'll do here, however. Without doing anything more than dipping my big toe into the murky waters of the theory of interpretation, I can at least say that the burden of proof lies on those who would give different readings to verbally identical texts. True, my critic and the narrator make some effort to shoulder that burden, since both mention the lifedates of our authors, and the narrator the pragmatism of William James. Mere passage of time doesn't ensure difference of meaning, however (else language would be extremely unstable, probably impossible), and even assuming that Menard's *Quixote* isn't Cervantes', the putative reference to James remains just that, putative, unless the passage in question can be tied to James in some way. If an allusion isn't clear from a passage, the usual way to establish its presence is to consult the surrounding verbal environment. Since Menard's prose is from first to last orthographically identical with Cervantes', though, no help from that quarter can be expected here. For the same reason, the passage from Menard actually has to be understood in exactly the same way as the corresponding passage from Cervantes, a fact reinforced if the circumstances surrounding the production of Menard's work are considered. The equivocation charge, then, is not out of place. The narrator once again willfully interprets as he chooses, never bothering with such matters as consistency if it doesn't suit him.

A more important objection, at least to my way of thinking, concerns not the "whether" of my analysis, but the "why." "Why make such heavy weather about it? Isn't it obvious that something's wrong, that his remarks are ludicrous? Why go on to explain the joke—for that is what it is—when it's obvious? That's just to kill it, and taking it in without detailed analysis is essential to appreciating it, and also essential to the story."

Yes and no, on that last point. Many times jokes, like stories in general, have to be read with a pair of glasses, and not a microscope, when first encountered in order for the reader to be properly affected. Future readings and complete understanding, however, often require a pains-taking analysis of elements whose nature and interactions aren't at all obvious, even if their effects are. Here, my aim is not only to explain what underlies our sense of the ludicrous in reading the narrator's remarks, but also to provide evidence for my more global thesis that the story is misunderstood unless read as ironic through and through. That last point is hardly obvious.

Critical Essay #12

The narrator's last point respecting his critical assessment of Menard can be more briefly considered. According to the him, there is a vast difference in style between Cervantes' and Menard's works. This time the advantage is Cervantes', however.

> The archaic style of Menard—quite foreign, after all [since Menard is French]—suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his forerunner, who handles with ease the current Spanish of his time.

But this is absurd. Menard steeped himself in the Spanish of Cervantes' time, and may well have written 17th century Spanish with ease—one suspects that he did, given his determination and seriousness. The fact that he didn't live in 17th-century Spain certainly doesn't entail, in and of itself, that his style is affected, any more than Cervantes' living in 17th century Spain entails that his isn't. In fact, even if Menard did write in the 20th century, and even if he, in contrast to Cervantes, didn't handle 17th-century Spanish with ease, that doesn't entail that his style was affected, and Cervantes' not. Psmith, a character in a number of P.G. Wodehouse's novels, handles the particular brand of English he speaks with ease, but his speech is affected nonetheless. And even if Psmith didn't handle it with ease but with great and grave difficulty, his speech would still be affected. People who have trouble expressing themselves don't ipso facto speak in an affected manner. The prominent factors that go into making speech affected include vocabulary, syntax, paragraph construction, and so on, such factors perhaps being relativized to (usually unstated) vocabulary, syntax, paragraph construction, and so on, that are taken as normative, i.e., taken as natural, not affected. Ease or difficulty of production and historical placement per se have nothing to do with it. A denizen of the 25th-century France who wrote the sort of English found in this paper wouldn't be writing in an affected manner. The narrator's argument concerning style is thus as shoddy as all his other arguments, and his delight in difference once again nothing more than demonstration of duncery. It is thus, in the context of the story's studied tone, further demonstration of Borges' superb irony, as well as his uncanny ability to parody prose that is itself affected. In this case, the result of the latter is an additional layer of irony, since because affectation here turns on itself, mocks and parodies itself, the narrator's apotheosis of Menard's "achievement"—duplicating another's exact words and claiming not just (numerical) difference but superiority—is itself a similar duplicative and dubious achievement: the prose of praise exemplifies the very affectation it denigrates. The narrator once again shows himself the spiritual kin of Menard.

Critical Essay #13

Praise of a man is a natural concomitant of praise of his achievement, and so Menard's alter ego proceeds to heap effusive praise on him. Beginning with the world-weary and intellectually dispiriting, if not condescending, remark that "there is no exercise of the intellect which is not, in the final analysis, useless," and illustrating his dolorous thesis with a comment to the effect that the eventual fate of entire philosophies is to pass into mere paragraphs or names in a history of philosophy, the narrator thus eases into his true topic: Menard, the man who transcended such *fin de siecle* truths, the artist who truly did create ex nihilo□or almost, anyway. His praise of the man, however, is as odd and unintentionally condemnatory as his claims respecting his achievement. Menard

> derived from these nihilistic verifications [a] singular . . . determination. He decided to anticipate the vanity awaiting all man's efforts; he set himself to an undertaking which was exceedingly complex and, from the beginning, futile. He dedicated his scruples and his sleepless nights to repeating an already extant book in an alien tongue. He multiplied draft upon draft, revised tenaciously and tore up thousands of manuscript pages. He did not let anyone examine these drafts and took care [that] they should not survive him. In vain have I tried to reconstruct them.

Taken seriously, this is praise that unwittingly damns both its object and itself. If all is for nought and Menard is deliberately imitating the universe, then he is deliberately pursuing nothing, and must be judged accordingly. Similarly, if the book he plans to write already exists and his aim is to repeat it, his task is indeed futile, as the narrator says, but not for any grand metaphysical reason having to do with the transient nature of all things. A much more mundane reason concerning actions which merely duplicate part of our intellectual history will do in this case. Sleepless nights, copious drafts, and efforts to cover one's artistic tracks are, in the light of the duplicative nature of Menard's task, its evident futility, and the lack of any artistic value of its end product, no grounds on which to praise the "artistic genius" behind them. Rather, they're good reasons to think that the so-called genius is mad, and that he prefers personally gratifying ego-projections to decidedly less gratifying encounters with reality. Ironically, the only fictional world Menard succeeds in creating is not one he himself would recognize, since it's the one he lives in, and mistakes for reality. The same goes for the narrator, of course. Thus the narrator's further remarks on Menard's creative efforts□

> [the] "final" *Quixote* [is, or can be seen as] a kind of palimpsest, through which the traces□tenuous but not indecipherable□of our friend's "previous" writing should be translucently visible . . . unfortunately, only a second Pierre Menard, inverting the other's

work, would be able to exhume and revive those lost Troys

□reinforce previous themes. Ironically, even on the narrator's and Menard's own principles, nothing, neither the final *Quixote* nor the discarded drafts nor anything else, could be counted as a "Troy." Nihilism doesn't allow that, and our two principals are, by their own admission, nihilists. In fact, of course, their entire philosophy of literature, whether of its creation (as with Menard) or its criticism (as with the narrator), is founded on a selfcontradiction. Nihilism can be used neither as a theoretical support for artistic creation□there would be nothing to aspire to□nor as a theoretical underpinning for value judgments□all such judgments would contradict their philosophical foundation. The narrator's praise of Menard's work, and so also of Menard, thus undermines itself.

Last and probably funniest of all, however, is praise of Menard because he "enriched . . . the halting and rudimentary art of reading" by adding a new "technique" to the usual repertoire,

that of . . . deliberate anachronism and . . . erroneous attribution. This technique, whose applications are infinite, prompts us to go through the *Odyssey* as if it were posterior to the *Aeneid* and the book *Le Jardin du Centaure of Madame Henri Bachelier* as if it were by Madame Henri Bachelier. This technique fills the most placid works with adventure.

Menard not only created a masterpiece; he taught us something new about the nature of artistic creation, namely that it's futile, but that one can nonetheless accomplish great things by repeating extant works. The fact that the lesson is self-contradictory is of no moment, apparently. And Menard, we now learn, not only added to literature and to the fundaments of the theory of artistic creation; he also taught us something about the theory of reading and added to the fundaments of the philosophy of interpretation. Now when we read we can attribute what we like to whom we like, and proceed accordingly. "Deliberate anachronism" and "erroneous attribution"□ this is such stuff as the new reading (protodeconstruction?) is made on. But it is also such stuff as illusions are made on. Since the applications of this new technique are, as the narrator rightly says, "infinite," what has really been issued is a cryptoinvitation to make all interpretations equally valid, because all equally well founded. The fact that the theory thus undermines itself, because it allows itself to be read anachronistically, and with anyone as its author, ironically escapes the narrator's notice. It, too, like his theory of value, is built on a selfdestructive premise. Thus nihilism in the evaluative realm meets its theoretical counterpart, anarchy, in the interpretive. The result is further immersion in the dream world of Borges' ironic tale.

Critical Essay #14

If the above is even roughly correct, Borges' story is a multi-leveled parody, thoroughly ironic in tone, and from first to last deadly serious in the way that only a sophisticated piece of humor can be. The very claim registered in its title, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote,*" is a focal point for the pervasive irony found throughout. But there is another level of enveloping irony not yet explored. Three routes lead to it, one from the *Quixote* itself, one from an essay of Borges on the *Quixote*, and one from elements within the story itself.

Consider first the *Quixote*. The story of the *Quixote* is basically quite simple. Don Quixote, an otherwise sane man, has had his wits scrambled by an inordinate devotion to literature, in particular, romances of chivalry. He imagines himself to be called upon to roam the world in search of adventures, ill-fitted though he undoubtedly is for trying encounters of any kind. Initially luring Sancho Panza, his loyal and credulous sidekick, with the prospect of governorship of an island, Quixote proceeds to wander the countryside and seek adventures befitting a grand knight. In his distorted mind everyday objects are transformed into things threatening, romantic, or noble, and he is thus plunged into absurd misadventure after absurd misadventure, always with unfortunate consequences for himself. He is finally "rescued" when one of his old friends disguises himself as a knight, overthrows him, and requires him to refrain from chivalrous exploits for a year. Soon after returning to his village, however, Don Quixote falls ill and dies.

My thesis is that the story of Don Quixote is, *mutatis mutandis*, the story of "Pierre Menard." Menard is the new Quixote, not the new Cervantes.

Consider now Borges' piece on the *Quixote*, "Partial Magic in the *Quixote*." "The form of the *Quixote*," Borges writes there, "made [Cervantes] counterpose a real prosaic world to an imaginary poetic world. . . . For Cervantes the real and the poetic were antinomies." The same real and prosaic world is counterposed to an imaginary and poetic world in "Pierre Menard," although in that world letters has won over arms, and the chief battleground is thus the page, not the plain. Just as, in Borges' words, "the plan of [Cervantes'] book precluded the marvelous [that is, the magical and the physically and logically impossible], [although] the latter had to figure in the novel, at least indirectly, as crimes and mystery [have to figure] in a parody of a detective story," so, too, the marvelous, the physically or logically impossible, has to figure in a parody of artistic creation, literary criticism, and creative genius. Like Cervantes, Borges could not "resort to talismans or enchantments, but [rather had to] insinuate . . . the supernatural in a subtle□ and therefore more effective□manner." In his "intimate being," Borges tells us, "Cervantes loved the supernatural." So did he, Borges. He showed his love by eventually resolving the antinomy between the poetic and the prosaic, and doing so without contradiction. The resolution can be found, in fact, in "Pierre Menard" and other of his fictional works.

If "Cervantes takes pleasure in confusing the objective and subjective, the world of the reader and the world of the book," so, once again, does Borges. But so, too, do Menard

and the narrator! There are crucial difference between the cases, however. Menard and his Sancho Panza have no initial fix on the difference between reality and illusion, and act, like Quixote and his Sancho Panza but unlike Cervantes and Borges, in dead but parodic earnest. The one fictional pair mistake barbers' basins for helmets, the other minuscule and useless academic studies for intellectual achievements. Our authors, on the other hand, are fully cognizant of the difference between reality and illusion, but delight in deliberately blurring the boundaries between them. They do so in order to achieve a number of artistic effects and, always in the case of Borges, sometimes in the case of Cervantes, to explore certain logical and metaphysical problems. To cite one important instance: Cervantes explicitly introduces himself into the *Quixote* as a character, introduces the *Quixote* into the *Quixote* as a book, and, in one chapter, slyly, playfully, and ironically advances the idea that he is not the author of the *Quixote*. Parallels with paradoxes of self-reference, for instance, Bertrand Russell's concerning the class of all classes not members of themselves, immediately suggest themselves. Borges introduces himself into his *Quixote* more subtly. On my reading, "Pierre Menard" is a scaled-down mock heroic parable set in the 20th century, with Menard as the 20th century equivalent of Don Quixote. Borges occupies□at least initially□Cervantes' position in relation to the story. But that changes; he like Cervantes, enters into his own story as a character. How he does this is complex, so I hope that the explanation which follows does justice to its complexity.

Menard is a 20th century knight-errant, that is, an academic. He's thus a 20th century figure in a profession held in high esteem but also frequently the object of ridicule, the latter because of the wellknown tendency of academics to foist their own particular brand of high falutin' and pretentious nonsense on other academics and unsuspecting members of the general public. Menard tilts at the windmills of erudition with learned-sounding but effectively pointless monographs and articles until he succumbs to his final and grandest delusion, that of writing a new book word-for-word identical with one he knows already exists, the *Quixote*. Here is the point at which Borges enters into the explanation. Borges is himself an academic *par excellence* and more than a little given to such fanciful, if not high falutin', nonsense as the denial of the existence of material objects. He's also and more than a little given to writing in a style that borders on the pretentious□as he himself well knows.

Simply in re-writing, in a very transformed fashion, the Quixote as "Pierre Menard," Borges undertakes a task parallel to that□artistically identical with that□of his protagonist. He introduces himself into the story, in other words, as his own failed author, Menard, in his attempt to create a new a story which is identical with one that already exists, one found in the *Quixote*. Unlike Cervantes, he identifies with his own very confused protagonist, all the while knowing that he's not him and doesn't suffer his delusions or mania. Yet, like Menard, he continues his efforts at creation, thinking all the while that all he's doing is repeating the work of another man. And, in a sense, he is. The laughable incidents, the grandiose scheme, the selfdelusion, the misdirected attempts for the highest value that man can attain, the loyal companion, above all the parody and ironic tone□all are there in both Cervantes and Borges. Borges doesn't succumb to his Menard's delusion, of course, in trying to write a book word-for-word identical with Cervantes, but he comes as close as possible while managing to avoid

stepping over the psychotic edge. Thus we see that Menard is Quixote, suitably modernized and intellectualized, and Menard also Borges, suitably fictionalized and exaggerated. But since Borges himself is Cervantes, suitably modernized and intellectualized, Cervantes is Borges is Menard is Quixote. The antinomy between the prosaic and the poetic, the real and the magical, fact and fiction, is ultimately resolved by Borges, then, in thoroughly blurring the distinction between them: in essence, at the metaphysical depths, there is no difference between them, or at least none that is discernible by us. That is one of Borges' philosophical insights, an insight that is ontological in nature. A second is actually meta-philosophical and methodological. It's that one important way to write metaphysics is to write metaphysical fiction, and that one way to write metaphysical fiction is to write meta-fictional fiction. In this case, that involves writing fiction ("Pierre Menard") about fiction (*Don Quixote*) that is, in the sense of the "is" of identity, the fiction written about. But if these are Borges' philosophical insights, he's also left us with at least three residual paradoxes to ponder and delight in. As might be expected, all are paradoxes of self-reference.

The first is that Borges pokes fun at himself□ and all other creative artists, too, of course, Cervantes and Menard included□and yet understanding the folly of the creative endeavor requires simultaneously understanding that it is serious business, hardly folly, and anything but laughable. To get Borges' point we have to take him and his story seriously; but to get his point we also have to see that he and his story, and so by implication all authors and stories, are not to be taken seriously. Authors are self-deluded fools, and writing a worthwhile story an impossible task. But to understand that, we have to interpret the author as anything but a self-deluded fool and his story as anything but worthless.

The second paradox concerns the fact that proper interpretation of Borges' story requires us to realize that Menard's *Quixote* won't be numerically distinct from Cervantes'. Menard's *Quixote* simply is Cervantes', even though it's thought by him to be a new and important work. Much of the story's irony, and so worth, depends on the fact that Menard failed and had to: reproducing another's work while knowing it and using it as a standard for the creation of your own necessarily means that nothing new has been achieved, no new object of worth has come into existence. Yet if Borges created "Pierre Menard" by intentionally reproducing another's work, all the while knowing it and using it as a standard for the creation of his own, then on the grounds just mentioned, grounds implicit in Borges' story itself, Borges himself failed to produce anything new and valuable. In other words, if Borges' story is good, that is at least in part because Menard didn't create a new and valuable work; but on the same grounds that condemn Menard, neither did Borges create a new and valuable work. The novelty□ numerical distinctness□and value of the story depend, internally, on grounds that, applied externally, condemn the story itself.

The third paradox is akin to the second but fully external. It's that "Pierre Menard" is an essentially parasitic work, well-nigh a reproduction of the essential features of Cervantes' *Quixote*. As such, it would seem to be the *Quixote*, or at least share its fate and have no value apart from it, no value not shared with it. But that's just not so. "Pierre Menard"'s existence is its own, and its value, as I hope to have shown, likewise

its own. The paradox, quite simply, is how, contrary to the seemingly impeccable argument that duplication means identity, duplication can sometimes make for difference; or, equivalently, how Don Quixote can ride again, even though his spurs have long been on the rack. (1.) For instance, Andre Maurois, in his "Preface" to Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. xi. Maurois doesn't get the descriptive details of the story right, either. (2.) Georges Charbonnier, *El escritor y su obra* (Veintiuno Editores, Mexico: 1967), p. 75; as reported by Gene H. Bell-Villada, p. 122. (3.) George Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec Jorge Luis Borges* (Paris 1967), p. 161; as reported by D. L. Shaw, p. 23. (4.) The notion of a category mistake is explained in the first chapter of Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*. (5.) The term "historical truth" has to be read in the way indicated, or the narrator's claim respecting Menard's pragmatism would be baseless. (6.) Since it might not be evident why such a doctrine is central to a philosophy known as "pragmatism," I should add that on pragmatism, one of the central, and justifiable, determinants of what we believe is cognitive convenience. In addition, the pragmatist holds that in the long run it's impossible to draw a distinction between what we justifiably believe to be the case and what is the case. This doesn't mean that for a pragmatist anything goes, i.e., that we can judge anything we like to be the case and it thereby will be so. Experience sets relatively strict constraints on what we can justifiably believe, as do other factors, such as consistency and coherence. For the pragmatist, though, justifiable belief is underdetermined by all such factors, and that necessitates the use of an additional criterion. According to him, that criterion is cognitive convenience. (7.) I hope. (8.) My thanks to Walter L. Weber for his comments, dogmatic though even he admits they were, on an earlier draft of this paper.

Source: Michael J. Wreen, "Don Quixote rides Again!," in *Romantic Review,* Vol. 86, No. 1, January, 1995, p. 141.

Topics for Further Study

Is "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" a short story or an essay?

Explain the difference between the interpretations of Cervantes' version and Menard's version of the passage from *Don Quoxote*. How does the passage of time affect the meaning of words?

Of what significance is knowing whether or not Pierre Menard is a fictional character?

What purpose does the catalogue of Menard's works serve?

The phrase "merely astonishing" is an oxymoron. Find another oxymoron in the story. How does it contribute to the story's meaning?

Compare and Contrast

1939: In Argentina, President Robert M. Ortiz tried to establish democracy in a mostly Fascist country, partly to remedy its economic difficulties.

Today: Since 1989, Carlos Saul Menem, elected president of Argentina, has successfully pulled Argentina back from the brink of economic despair. He has balanced the budget and imposed an austerity program to curb inflation, which had been running at 900 percent in the 1980s. With diplomatic relations restored with Great Britain after a falling-out over the Falkland Islands in 1982, Argentina is well on its way to establishing itself as a positive economic power in South America.

1939: Europe mobilized for inevitable war with Germany. Hitler invaded Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Today: Although the Balkan area remains a military hot spot, decisive action on the part of NATO has prevented the conflict from intensifying and spreading to other countries.

1939: Modernist literature expressed a sense of pessimism and exhaustion through flat characters who move relentlessly through a complex and absurd world.

Today: Postmodern literature attempts to express the uniqueness of the individual through the theme of relative values. At the same time, however, a sizable and growing number of writers are turning back to transcendent values, aware that, despite diversity, the human condition shares many values and experiences in common.

What Do I Read Next?

On the theme of memory, see Borges' "Shakepeare's Memory", in which the German narrator is possessed by the bard's thoughts, and also Borges' "Funes, His Memory", about a man who could forget nothing. For other Borgesian fictional essays, "Parable of Cervantes and the *Quixote*" is a brief commentary on the fate of literary works, "An Examination of the Work of Henry Quain" presents notes on an unwritten novel, and "The Approach to Al- Mu'Tasim" is a quasi-serious treatise on a nonexistent novel very similar to "Pierre Menard".

Colombian Gabriel Garcia Marquez's short story parable "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" concerns differing interpretations of reality.

Borges often acknowledged the influence of Franz Kafka on his own work. *The Trial* is representative of Kafka's themes and style.

Frederick Crews' *The Pooh Perplex* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, like "Pierre Menard", also parody the self-importance of literary scholars.

Further Study

Alazraki, Jaime, "Oxymoronic Structure in Borges' Essays," in *The Cardinal Points of Borges*, edited by Lowell Dunham and Ivar Ivask, University of Oklahoma Press, 1971.

Alazraki analyzes the linguistic and thematic oxymorons in Borges' essays, concluding that they serve as a form of conciliation between contradictory terms.

Alifano, Roberto, *Twenty-four Conversations with Borges: Including a Selection of Poems*, Lascaux Publishers, 1984.

A series of interviews with an aging Borges conducted from 1981 through 1983, arranged by topic.

Balderston, Daniel, *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges*, Duke University Press, 1993.

Balderston researched extensively the sources for seven Borges works to conclude that his seemingly apocryphal details are mostly factual and therefore do represent reality.

Barrenechea, Ana Maria, *Borges: The Labyrinth Maker*, New York University Press, 1965.

The first serious scholarly work on Borges. Although Barrenechea ignores Borges' humor and irony, her analysis remains convincing and important.

Cohen, J. M., *Jorge Luis Borges*, Barnes & Noble Books, 1973.

A brief analysis of Borges' works juxtaposed with a summary of his life.

di Giovanni, Norman Thomas, *The Borges Tradition* , Constable, 1995.

Fives commemorative lectures on Borges by leading scholars published on the occasion of the lifting of a trade embargo between Britain and Argentina.

Fishburn, Evelyn, and Psiche Hughes, *A Dictionary of Borges*, Duckworth, 1990.

An alphabetically arranged list of allusions found in Borges' works with a brief description for each entry.

Lusky Friedman, Mary, *The Emperor's Kites: A Morphology of Borges' Tales*, Duke University Press, 1987.

An examination of Borges' stories through the structuralist lens, following the approach of Vladimir Propp's 1928 *The Morphology of the Folktale*.

Stabb, Martin S., *Jorge Luis Borges*, Twayne, 1970.

A standard though dated Twayne survey of Borges' life and works.

Woodall, James, *Borges: A Life*, HarperCollins, 1996.

Woodall's recent work is considered by many to be the best general biography of Borges.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LDNfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and

undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LDNfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LDNfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LDNfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LDNfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LDNfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literature of Developing Nations for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literature of Developing Nations for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literature of Developing Nations for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LDNfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LDNfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literature of Developing Nations for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literature of Developing Nations for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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