

Can Pierre Menard be the author of *Don Quixote*?

Jorge Luis Borges' short story "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" is a favorite source of intuitions concerning the ontological status of a literary work of art. Many philosophers are convinced that Borges has shown in this piece of fiction how two different literary artworks can share the same text, therewith offering support to the view that works are not texts. However, a debate has emerged recently concerning the ability of this story to support such view. In this paper, after reviewing the reasons backing the two positions, I take a skeptical approach to Menard's alleged accomplishment. I argue that there is nothing in Borges' story to favor the possible existence of a pair of works having an identical text. In fact, I suggest that if there is something that one can infer from the tale, it is the conceptual impossibility of projects like Menard's.

1. Two works and one text: the anti-textualist use of Menard's Don Quixote

What a literary artwork is and what sort of relation it has with a text, an author and an audience are central questions for a philosophy of literary objects. Arthur Danto has offered a well-known answer to these questions by defending a theory based on the place of interpretation in our ontology and epistemology of artworks.

In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, where Danto first called attention to Borges' contribution to the ontology of art, Danto argued against the thesis that a literary work is identical to its text. According to Danto, such thesis, also known as "textualism", was shown to be false by Borges' story "Pierre Menard autor del Quijote". In this story we are confronted with a conceptually possible scenario where two different literary works share a single text. Pierre Menard, a fictitious French writer of the turn of the century, is shown as intending and succeeding in writing a work which has the very same text as the famous

Don Quixote written centuries earlier by the Spaniard Miguel de Cervantes. Despite these two works sharing an identical text, many important artistic properties separate the two works. Among these properties, Danto finds the following to be noteworthy:

Borges tells us that the *Quixote* of Menard is infinitely more subtle than that of Cervantes. (...) Cervantes “opposes to the fiction of chivalry the tawdry provincial reality of his country.” Menard on the other hand (...) selects for its reality “the land of Carmen during the century of Lepanto and Lope de Vega.” (...) Menard was perhaps making an oblique characterization of *Salambô* as a piece of historical fiction, no such intention would have been possible for Cervantes, who was after all a contemporary of Shakespeare. “The contrast in style is also vivid” (...) “The archaic style of Menard – quite foreign after all – suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his fore-runner, who handles with ease the current Spanish of his time.” (35)

This list of properties allegedly distinguishing both works could go on. But Danto’s main point is that most of them depend directly on the context which surrounded their creation. Although sharing an identical text, given their particular histories of creation, the two works possess different properties. Therefore, the two works must be numerically different.

Borges’ story also plays an important role in Danto’s effort to explain what is wrong with textualism, since it clearly exhibits the central role of the context of creation in the individuation of artworks. It teaches us that “works are in part constituted by their location in the history of literature as well as by their relationships to their authors, (...) you cannot isolate these factors from the work since they penetrate, so to speak, the *essence* of the work.” (35–36). A change in the context of creation produces a change in the relation of the work with its text. Were we to vary sufficiently the context of creation, even if the text remains the same, the work linked to such text will change. This explains why it is perfectly possible to have more than one work “embodied” in one text.

However, an important problem related to copying arises for Danto’s type of anti-textualist ontology. Once it is allowed for works to share their texts with other works, the question arises concerning the difference between the production of a true new work and the production of a mere copy of a previously existing work. If a difference in the text cannot establish a difference between a true work and a crude copy, what does?

There are many answers to this question. One of them, however, is salient for the way in which it challenges the traditional reading of Borges’ story. It is advanced by Michael Wreen on his article “Once is not

enough?" Wreen argues that whatever is crucially different in the cases of copying and plagiarism from the cases of true creation of a work, it is absent in Borges' story. If this is the case, according to Wreen, Borges' Menard does not count as a true creator of a new work but only as a peculiar copyist. Although the view that Menard is only a peculiar copyist is not new, the manner in which Wreen has argued for it from a non-textualist perspective is certainly unusual.¹

2. *Pierre Menard, a peculiar copyist*

Wreen's objective is to argue that the case of Pierre Menard provides no evidence for the view that "two literary works can be perceptually indistinguishable and yet be two, not one, in number." (149) The strategy that Wreen uses to prove his main point is based on indicating some features that appear in Borges' story concerning the context of creation of Menard's *Don Quixote*.

Under the assumption that to copy a text is not to create a new work, Wreen sets the stage for his skeptical proposal by demanding a minimum of attention to what Borges actually said in the story. This request is the more pertinent because authors like Danto are liable to some carelessness in dealing with the actual story. For instance, two things noticed by Wreen are Danto's wrongly calling Borges' story *Pierre Menard, Symbolist Poet* (33) and, by this use of italics, misleadingly suggesting a short story to be the title of a book. However, Wreen's criticism goes well beyond these interesting although tangential points. His main objective, as I said, is to exhibit why Menard cannot be correctly identified as the author of a new work.

The first point that Wreen mentions to justify his contention is that, according to the story, Cervantes' text was known to Menard *before* he produced a text word-for-word identical to it. This is important because, besides the previous existence of another text, copying also presupposes a previous acquaintance with the text to be copied.

Second, not only did Menard read Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and practically all the other known works of the Spanish author, but his explicit *authorial intention* was to produce a book with an identical text to Cervantes' up to the last detail. His intention then was to accomplish the

¹ As an example of a textualist approach to Borges' story in which it is also argued that Menard is a peculiar copyist, see Elgin and Goodman.

the writing of a book by generating not any text, not even a variant of the text of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, but exactly that text. In this respect, Wreen notes, we are again in front of a feature that characterizes the accurate copying of a text: the explicit intention of a copyist is to produce an exact replica of the text that is to be copied.

Third, Menard's *literary touchstone* was for his book's text to match exactly Cervantes' text. In other words, the measure of Menard's success was the production of an identical text to Cervantes'. The only way in which Menard would consider his task as having been completed was when he had produced an exact replica to Cervantes' text. As Wreen says, "only then, after checking Cervantes', would he know that he had written what he wanted to." (155) Once more, this is precisely what it takes for a copyist to succeed in her task. It is only when the copy matches exactly the text being copied that such task has been adequately performed.

In the case Menard, the only condition lacking to make it a clear case of copying is the atypical causal route that he used to produce his text. Wreen recognizes that this is the condition that seems to make the crucial difference but he downgrades its importance. Although Menard did not perform a typical transcription of a text, what he is said to have done:

Is very close to a statement of necessary and sufficient conditions for intentional, accurate copying, the only condition missing being the one respecting accurate causal transmission (...) [but] Menard produced no new book at all. His book looks a whole lot like Cervantes' for the simple reason that it is Cervantes'. (156)

Therefore, given Menard's previous acquaintance with an existing text, his intentions in producing an identical text and the measure of success of his task, Wreen concludes that Menard did not produce a new work. If anything, he was able to generate in a very peculiar manner a *copy* of Cervantes' text.

Before discussing a reply to Wreen, it is important to note that his criticisms come from a non-textualist philosopher who, like Danto, fully recognizes the centrality of the context of creation in determining the "essential" properties of a literary work. His basic complaint is that it is precisely the context of creation of Menard's text which precludes its identification with a new work. Wreen's suggestion then is that one must be very careful when applying a non-textualist criterion to an allegedly new literary accomplishment. In particular, a non-textualist should pay particular attention to those cases in which the production of a text comes too close to typical cases of copying.

3. Janaway's reply to Wreen

Wreen's proposal was challenged by Christopher Janaway soon after its appearance. In his contribution to the debate Janaway defended two main points: first, Wreen's reading of Borges is an impoverishment of the actual story, and, second, his philosophical worries concerning Menard's fictitious accomplishment are unfounded.

For Janaway, all worries about Menard having copied Cervantes should be completely dispelled when we read passages like this one:

No quería componer otro Quijote—lo cual es fácil—sino *el Quijote*. Inútil agregar que no encaró nunca una transcripción mecánica del original; no se proponía copiarlo. Su admirable ambición era producir unas páginas que coincidieran—palabra por palabra y línea por línea—con las de Miguel de Cervantes. (OC 1: 446)

According to Janaway it is clear that the actual story does not support Wreen's proposal. Nowhere in the story do we find Menard wanting or succeeding in the copy of a text. Menard never did or even tried to copy Cervantes.

A more complicated matter, however, is to show that even if in the actual story Menard is never presented as intending or succeeding in copying Cervantes' text, one should conclude that his particular case does not suggest a peculiar mode of copying. Consequently, Janaway reviews the reasons offered by Wreen in support of the thesis that the context of creation of Menard's *Don Quixote* strongly suggests that Menard never produced a new work.

In reply to Wreen's first point that the text of Cervantes was known to Menard before producing an identical text, Janaway recognizes this as true but insists on its being irrelevant due to Menard's having for all purposes never known it. We hear Menard saying that "Mi recuerdo general del Quijote, simplificado por el olvido y la indiferencia, puede muy bien equivaler a la imprecisa imagen anterior de un libro no escrito." (OC 1: 448) There is nothing in the context of creation suggested by the story to impede us from taking at face value such confession by Menard. Hence, Janaway proposes, Menard was in the same condition as one who first tries to write a new work: "we are to think of someone setting out to reproduce a text *by the same kind of process involved in ordinary authorship*, and actually succeeding to the extent of two and half chapters." (73)

Wreen has also pointed to Menard's explicit authorial intention as one of intending the production of a text identical to Cervantes' in every

detail. For Janaway this is also true but again it should not be seen as an act analogous to the intention of copying a work. Two reasons can be given to see this. First, the working assumption for Wreen's objection to make sense is that a text is not identical with a work. Thus, intending to produce a text identical to another text is not to be confused with intending to produce a work based on a text. We should avoid this confusion even if this intention involves the production of a text identical to one already existing. Second, intending to produce a new work which is based on another work is a common practice among literary authors:

For texts A and B to be distinct works, it is not necessary that A should play *no* role in the intentions that give rise to B. ... Thus being produced with a dominant and pervasively manifested intention *vis-à-vis* the text of *Don Quixote* is not, in itself, a property which rules out being distinct from *Don Quixote*. (74)

The third reason proposed by Wreen in support of his skeptical approach to Borges' story, is also replied by Janaway. According to Janaway, Wreen is misreading Borges when he thinks that Menard had as a measure of his success the accomplishment of a text identical to Cervantes. In the story "Menard neither wrote from memory, nor consulted Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as a 'literary touchstone' against which to check his own output." (73-74) Therefore, Wreen has falsely depicted Menard's creative strategy.

Having replied to the three main points supporting Wreen's position, Janaway goes on in his effort to prove him wrong in a more ambitious manner. Even if Wreen's three points were correct, Janaway argues, he would still not get what he wants. The list of features surrounding Menard's alleged copying of Cervantes does not include that very feature that otherwise would make of Menard a true copyist: accurate causal transmission of one text into another. Therefore, without this condition Wreen's proposal loses all its motivation.

As a final illustration of Wreen's misconceptions, Janaway imagines the following situation. Two subjects in a psychological experiment are each given a piece of paper. One of them, is told to "write down the name of a colour, and arrange the following words into a meaningful sentence..." (75) The second subject, who is aware of what the first is supposed to do, is required to write down what he thinks the other will write down. Janaway then asks us to imagine this:

Suppose the experimenter is presented at the end with two exactly coinciding inscriptions. Does she think, 'These very nearly fulfil the

conditions for intentional, accurate copying'? Perhaps; but, unless she is very unwise, she does not on that basis discount them *as an instance of copying*. For it is possible—hence the point of the experiment—to produce coincident inscriptions intentionally, without copying in any sense. (75)

Since this imagined experiment is supposed to be analogous with Menard's accomplishment, it is very unwise of Wreen to discount it as an instance of copying.

So, Janaway concludes, Wreen has falsely pictured Borges' story failing to appreciate what distinguishes true contexts of creation from those contexts in which all that ever gets produced are copies of texts.

4. Menard's impossible feat

In this section I want to argue for the three following points. First, Borges' story is itself sufficiently ambiguous to preclude its textual use as a decisive proof concerning the ontological status of Menard's text; particularly as to whether we are dealing with a new work or a copy of Cervantes' text. Second, although Janaway is right in insisting that Menard never copied Cervantes' text in the usual way, Wreen is justified in thinking that the only possibility left to make sense of a feat like Menard's is copying. Third, if this is the only possibility open to Menard, it is correct to raise serious doubts concerning the status of his text as being a true new work.

In cases like the one we are now discussing, it is always tempting to point to passages in the story hoping that they will prove to be a decisive evidence for the competing interpretations. In fact, this is what Wreen and Janaway do most of the time. They seem to think that if we look carefully to what it is actually said in the text, their respective interpretations will be validated. Since their specific concerns are centered so much on the things that Menard allegedly performed, checking what Borges actually says in his story is inevitable and useful. But this strategy is profitable only up to a certain point. The story's usefulness for settling the issues at hand is limited when we are dealing with some specific ontological theses and distinctions that for Borges were irrelevant for his literary purposes, perhaps unknown to him, or both. I will illustrate this point offering as an example a central ontological distinction which is treated in the story in a way that easily lends itself to contradictory interpretations.

Recall that a central tenet shared by all the disputants in this debate around Menard's feat is that evidently a new copy is not a new work. Moreover, that the context of creation of a new work is an essential factor that needs to be taken into account in our identification of that work. The dispute is centered on whether Menard's text was produced in a context which justifies its being identified as a true new work and not just as a copy of a previously existing text. As a way to decide this issue, let us look at what it is actually said in the story concerning the task that Menard set himself to perform. We then run into famous passages like this one: "No quería componer otro Quijote—lo cual es fácil—sino *el Quijote*." (OC 1: 446) Or this other:

Componer el Quijote a principios del siglo diecisiete era una empresa razonable, necesaria, acaso fatal; a principios del veinte, es casi imposible. No en vano han transcurrido trescientos años, cargados de complejimos hechos. (OC 1: 448)

In order to make sense of these passages, let us ask ourselves: is Borges suggesting the existence of *two* works, one written by Cervantes and the other by Menard, or only *one* work which has two authors? We know that the discussions using this story typically take for granted the first alternative. But clearly these and other passages of Borges' story do not support this last reading as the only possible one. In fact, these passages are completely coherent with the other alternative. Borges' fiction is sufficiently ambiguous to permit a justified reading in which the whole challenge which Menard set himself consists in performing the incredible feat of writing again the only *Don Quixote*: "No ... otro Quijote —lo cual es fácil— sino *el Quijote*." (OC 1: 446)

Consider also the closing remarks of the story about Menard's enrichment of our traditional reading techniques. The best way to make sense of them is to assume once again the existence of only one work, not two, as is usually suggested. The narrator in the story talks about a single work *The Imitation of Christ* written by the pious Kempis, which can be *attributed* to contemporary authors like Céline or Joyce with striking results:

Menard (acaso sin quererlo) ha enriquecido mediante una técnica nueva el arte detenido y rudimentario de la lectura: la técnica del anacronismo deliberado y de las atribuciones erróneas. ... Esa técnica puebla de aventura los libros más calmosos. Atribuir a Louis Ferdinand Céline o a James Joyce la *Imitación de Cristo* ¿no es una suficiente renovación de esos tenuous avisos espirituales? (OC 1: 450)

Thus, the invitation is not to imagine Céline or Joyce as authors of different works having identical texts available for different readings but

to imagine them as the authors of the very same work with all the ironical and surprising consequences involved in such case.

If one insists that all of these passages only make sense if we assume that Borges was defending all the time the view that a work cannot be its text, then one is deliberately reading into a piece of fiction a highly contentious ontological thesis. It is true that a work having more than one author is a very difficult thing to imagine, but my point is that the story also lends itself to this reading. Indeed, the “impossibility from the beginning” with which the narrator introduces Menard’s undertaking might be there not as an ironical comment from Borges but as a constitutive descriptive element of the story.²

Therefore, we must be careful about deciding ontological disputes like the present one by a mere consultation of what is written in the story. In fact, that these disputes ever arose is the best evidence for the fertile ambiguity of the story and the hopelessness of reaching a complete agreement as to what Borges “really said” by exclusively looking at his text.

Since consulting the story cannot by itself decide the dispute between Wreen and Janaway, we are led back to more familiar philosophical grounds. We should treat Menard’s case in the way we usually treat other thought experiments related to “twin cases”: using the basic materials given in the story and then analyzing its consequences in terms of conceptual coherence and plausibility.³ Although Borges’ story offers us the basic plot we must let our philosophical intuitions try to decide the issue at hand. Indeed, these sort of considerations explain why it is customary in the philosophical literature related to Menard’s case to suppose as a legitimate conceptual move that he completed his task, even though the story never says he did. Such idealization does not

² It is also very unfortunate that at least one popular English translation of Borges’ story is so unreliable that resorting to the actual text of this translation becomes a dangerous business, although for different reasons than the ones I have mentioned. For instance, in the original story in Spanish we hear the narrator conceding the impossibility of Menard’s project and only then speculating which of all the *impossible* ways was the least interesting: “... pero la empresa era de antemano imposible y de todos los medios imposibles para llevarla a término, éste era el menos interesante.” (OC 1: 447) On the other hand, the English translation by Anthony Bonner says this: “... but the undertaking was impossible from the start, and of all the *possible* means of carrying it out, this one was the least interesting.” (*Ficciones* 49, my emphasis)

³ Basically, a “twin case” is a conceptually possible scenario involving two objects considered identical in some of their properties—say, their physical or perceptual features—nonetheless crucially different in some of their other properties.

seem to modify the essential features of Borges' story. So let us apply this strategy and try to make Menard's story as plausible as we can offering the most coherent interpretation of the tale.

If the issue is whether Menard copied in the usual way in which a text is said to have been copied from another, it is clear from the start that Menard did not. It should be clear that this is the working hypothesis of the whole debate. Hence, Janaway is in the wrong lead by trying to refute what Wreen and everyone takes for granted. The basic question again then is whether in order to make the thought experiment related to Borges' story minimally coherent, Menard—although not having copied the text of Cervantes in the usual way—nonetheless copied it in a less usual way. I think this is the most plausible reading. In fact, the only one coherent with the basic elements given by the story. To see why this idea is plausible we must recall Wreen's third point proposing that Menard had as a "literary touchstone" the text of Cervantes.

Wreen's essential point seems to be that a criterion for completion is a necessary condition for the task which Menard set himself to accomplish. Fortunately, there is a consensus about the satisfaction of this criterion in Menard's case: everyone agrees that Menard's criterion of completion was to produce a text word for word identical to the text of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. It is this text and only this text that is to serve for such purpose. It is also clear from the outset that Menard knew exactly which was his objective and what would it mean to accomplish it. Therefore, this is the basic rationale behind his unusual project, without it the project does not even begin to make sense.

But, there is an inevitable verificationist side to this. Built into any notion of completion is the idea that there is a way to know when it is justified to believe that the task to be performed has been completed. If in this case the production of a text identical to Cervantes' is the only criterion for completion, how could anyone, starting with Menard himself, know that the task was completed unless this involved the actual checking of Menard's text with Cervantes'? The only *possible* way to know whether Menard succeeded or failed in his task is by matching his text to Cervantes'. Janaway might be right in saying that in the story "Menard neither wrote from memory, nor consulted Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as a 'literary touchstone' against which to check his own output." (73–74). But the main point is that somehow Menard *has* to have a way to check his own output, otherwise his criterion of completion would be useless. And, thus, his project would be incoherent.

Incidentally, this shows a crucial disanalogy between Janaway's imagined psychological task and Menard's case. In Janaway's story the psychologist plays the all important role of judging that the task was either successfully or unsuccessfully performed. Without the psychologist or someone else acting as a judge who can verify the results of the task, the task itself becomes meaningless. It should come as no surprise that according to Janaway's own imagined example such method involved the *direct checking* of both slips of paper by the psychologist.

Coming back to Borges' story, what is very striking is that according to it Menard *did* accomplish part of his task. Thus, the question of how Menard is supposed to have performed this task is a real and pressing question. This is even more unsettling because as I said earlier most philosophers using this particular twin case idealize even more Menard's partial success making it a total one. Menard is usually thought to have produced the whole text of *Don Quixote*. In the absence of an external judge who can play the essential role of matching the two texts, there is but one option left to make sense of this story: Menard did it himself.⁴ One can push this a little further and say that the only way in which Menard knew that he had finished his two chapters was either by memory or by direct checking. If this is the case, Wreen is right, both possibilities are closer to copying than to a genuine instance of authorship.

But perhaps Wreen did not go far enough in his proposal. Since the story denies Menard having performed his deed by an act of mnemonics or by having directly checked Cervantes' text, we must conclude that, as it stands, Menard's feat *is* conceptually impossible. It is impossible because unless there is a way to compare his text to Cervantes' — something explicitly precluded by the elements offered in the thought experiment — this is a task that has no way to reach its objective. For that to happen, for Menard or anyone to know whether he accomplished his task, a measure of success or failure is required. Clearly the measure of success is there in the matching with Cervantes text, but the possibility of measuring Menard's accomplishment is notoriously absent. Because neither Menard nor an external judge is supposed to be there when his text might perhaps accidentally come across its goal,

⁴ Notice that even if one could suggest that Menard (obviously not the one of Borges' story) arrived to his text by chance, he would still have to have a way to tell that he had indeed arrived to his goal. So, bringing in chance does not answer the question we have raised.

Menard's belief that for him to complete his undertaking he would only have to be immortal in order to carry it out: "Me bastaría ser inmortal para llevarla a cabo" (OC 1: 447), is simply false. Eternity would not get him closer to carry out an impossible feat.

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