

“HIS INSECT-LIKE HANDWRITING”:
MARGINALIA AND COMMENTARIES
ON BORGES AND MENARD

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The footnote near the end of “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote” reads: “Recuerdo sus cuadernos cuadriculados, sus negras tachaduras, sus peculiares símbolos tipográficos y su letra de insecto. En los atardeceres le gustaba salir a caminar por los arrabales de Nîmes; solía llevar consigo un cuaderno y hacer una alegre fogata” (*Obras completas* 1: 538). The reference to handwriting has tantalized to me for years, given that there was a real Dr. Pierre Menard who published a rather maddening little book, *L'écriture et le subconscient: Psychanalyse et graphologie*, in 1931 (with a revised and expanded edition in 1951), as well as *La Page d'écriture*, a further study of graphological analysis, in 1948. Borges would have known of Menard because of the latter's collaborations in a couple of avant-garde magazines, notably because of his essay on the handwriting of the Marquis de Sade in George Bataille's magazine *Documents* in 1929. (In May 1939, the very month of the publication of the Borges story in *Sur*, Menard published an essay on the handwriting of Lautréamont in André Breton and Pierre Mabille's magazine *Minotaure*.) In *Variaciones Borges* 28, which appeared in 2009, I reflected on Borges's own manuscripts, and analyzed in some detail a manuscript page from the early 1930s which contains annotations for the essays that later formed the core of *Discusión* in 1932; in addition, in a keynote talk (transmitted by videoconference) to the conference on Borges and France that was held at the Universidad Católica Argentina in September 2009, I talked in much more detail about *L'écriture et*

le subconscient. Here I would like to reflect on the relation between Menard and Borges, and to add into the mix some comments on René Ventura's recent book *La Vraie vie de Pierre Menard, ami de Borges*, published by Lucie éditions in Nîmes in 2009, which follows closely on another publication in French, *Une vie de Pierre Ménard*, by the eminent scholar Michel Lafon (Gallimard, 2008). As you will see, the question of the "real" (which I took up in 1993 in *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges*, which includes a discussion of Dr. Pierre Menard and his graphology in the chapter on "Pierre Menard") exerts a fascination that has led several researchers to great lengths, perhaps only comparable to that exerted by the *Anglo-American Cyclopedia* on Allan White (in the issue of *Variaciones* devoted to "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" in 2003, later included in the book that Cristina Parodi and Iván Almeida published on "Tlön," *El fragmento infinito*).

The connection between Borges's Menard and the real Pierre Menard is tantalizing, precisely because Dr. Menard (as I'll call the author of *L'écriture et le subconscient*) is so interested in the question of the ways in which handwriting betrays character and circumstance. He holds that graphology is a way of seeing in an "exterior" way the "inner" life, a notion which has parallels in Borges's ideas of the same period that character can be presented in fiction in an externalized way through "visual scenes," and that there is no need to follow the conventions of what he calls "psychological" fiction: the stories of *Historia universal de la infamia*, for instance, "no son, no tratan de ser, psicológicos" (1: 341). In this respect, he anticipates the emphasis on the "letter" in the thought of Jacques Lacan, in such texts as "Instances de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud," and in fact his son Augustin Menard is a Lacanian psychoanalyst in Nîmes. (The son is mentioned twice in Ventura's *La vraie vie de Pierre Menard*, 85 and 117, and has just published a book, *Voyage au pays des psychoses*, with the same press in Nîmes that issued Ventura's book.) Menard writes:

L'écriture est l'inscription graphique de gestes non surveillés dont on peut déterminer d'une façon précise et objective l'énergie, l'étendue, la direction, la forme, le rythme. Tous nos gestes traduisent nos états d'âme. La graphologie a donc une base solide, disons le mot, scientifique. (7)

He is also concerned with the relation between an original and a copy:

Pour bien se rendre compte de toutes les particularités d'une écriture, une bonne méthode consiste à la calquer et à la reproduire avec une plume. On voit ainsi les différences qui existent entre l'original et la copie ou la reproduction. (49)

When Borges underlies his Menard's "pragmatism" he may be thinking of Dr. Menard's insistence that graphology could provide a scientific and material basis for psychoanalysis, and that its techniques are empirically based.

Dr. Menard's analysis suggests, then, that handwriting is a gestural form that is expressive of a personality. It is also a way of appropriating a text analogous, perhaps, to Duchamp's readymades, existing objects that are recycled and resignified after being signed. In the Borges story the narrator says, near the end, that even those parts of the *Quixote* that Menard had not set his hand to rewriting bear the trace of his "prior" writing, like a medieval palimpsest (of which more later). Of course the narrator writes "previo" in quotation marks here: what comes before and what comes after are profoundly disturbed by this act of appropriation and reappropriation.

Harold Anderson's 1934 review of Dr. Menard's book in the *American Journal of Psychology* provides an adequate summary of Menard's argument that handwriting "is a graphic record of uncensored gestures by means of which energy, extent, direction, form, and rhythm can be determined and studied in a precise and objective manner." Anderson objects, however, that Menard's use of diary entries could be misleading, in particular because in "diaries, from the context of which the author has taken clues, it is not clear that 'sensuality,' 'anguish,' 'egoism,' and other mental states described as 'subconscious emotions' are themselves reliably defined or reliably correlated with their alleged characteristics in handwriting" (532).

Had Dr. Menard had the chance to analyze Borges's handwriting he would have noted, no doubt, the tiny size and precision of the hand, and that Borges printed rather than writing in cursive. Borges's own description of his Menard's writing—"Recuerdo sus cuadernos cuadriculados, sus negras tachaduras, sus peculiares símbolos tipográficos y su letra de insecto"—is precisely descriptive of his habits at the time of the writing of the story, even to the extent of referring to the graph paper he often used (though the manuscript of "Pierre Menard" itself is on accounting

paper, with columns for credits and debits). The “peculiar typographical symbols” are visible, for instance, in the published fragment of the manuscript of “Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su laberinto,” in which geometrical symbols—black and hollow squares, triangles and circles—are used to mark the places where certain emendations or additions are to substitute for earlier wording. (In the published manuscript of “El Aleph” that is in the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, Borges uses a numerical system to rearrange the things that his narrator sees in the aleph.) The “negras tachaduras” are frequent in Borges’s manuscripts, making it impossible for those of us who have access only to published or facsimile versions to make out what the first versions were: these “palimpsests” have yet to reveal their secrets, and the collectors who hold the manuscripts, or have them on consignment for hundreds of thousands of dollars, are unlikely to cooperate with the efforts of scholars to pry into the secrets of what facsimiles or low resolution images conceal.

Borges’s narrator writes:

He reflexionado que es lícito ver en el *Quijote* “final” una especie de palimpsesto, en el que debe traslucirse los rastros —**tenues pero no indecifrables**— de la “previa” escritura de nuestro amigo. Desgraciadamente, sólo un segundo Pierre Menard, invirtiendo el trabajo del anterior, podría exhumar y resucitar esas Troyas. . . (1: 538)

Given Dr. Menard’s writings on the traces of the unconscious in the letter, Freud’s famous meditation on the “magic writing pad” is pertinent here: Cervantes’s text reveals the traces of the trauma of Menard’s writing. As De Quincey argues:

What else than a natural and mighty palimpsest is the human brain? Such a palimpsest is my brain; such a palimpsest, oh reader! is yours. Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly as light. Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet, in reality, not one has been extinguished (“The Palimpsest of the Human Brain”).

Of the attempts by medieval monks to erase the “previous” writing, he writes:

They did the thing proposed to them: they did it effectually, for they founded upon it all that was wanted: and yet ineffectually, since we unrav-

elled their work; effacing all above which they had superscribed; restoring all below which they had effaced.” . . . “the mysterious hand-writings of grief or joy . . . have inscribed themselves successively upon the palimpsest of your brain.

The “writing” of the letter on the brain, then, directly links the reference to the palimpsest in the story (surely based in large part on this De Quincey reference) with Dr. Menard’s reflections on handwriting and psychoanalysis.

Some examples of the analysis of Borges’s manuscripts are now in order. As mentioned before, there are few important manuscripts accessible in libraries. The manuscript of “El Aleph” is in the National Library in Madrid, and has been published in a facsimile edition, though the materials that presented this manuscript are very deficient in terms of scholarly rigor, as has been noted in the reviews. The manuscript of “El Sur” is in the Bodmer Library in Geneva, and the same institution (dedicated to the preservation of great works of humanity) has recently acquired the manuscript of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”; both are apparently fairly clean copies with little interest for genetic criticism. The first pages of various manuscripts, including “Pierre Menard,” “Funes,” “Tlön,” “La biblioteca de Babel” and “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” are reproduced in various catalogues published by Lame Duck Books in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which has listed them for sale prices between \$450,000 and \$600,000 each. Several other manuscript pages are reproduced (though with quite poor resolution) in books by Félix della Paolera and Miguel de Torre Borges.

In the article mentioned I discuss, among other things, a couple of brief page references to Alfred Noyes’s book on William Morris published in 1908 that are barely visible on a poorly reproduced manuscript page in Félix della Paolera’s *Borges: Develaciones*. The first of these includes a quotation of a fragment of Tennyson’s “Morte D’Arthur” in which the passages that Borges comments on in “La postulación de la realidad”—“then, because his wound was deep” and “On one side lay the Ocean, and on one/ Lay a great water, and the moon was full” are marked with italics, though Noyes does not explain why he has marked those particular passages. (This becomes clear in Borges’s gloss, which focuses on the way in which certain details imply “una realidad más compleja que la declarada al lector.”) The second of these, on page 61, reads:

It is in more ways than one that the above may be opposed to the description in Tennyson of how an arm, “clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful,” arose from out the bosom of the lake, holding the sword. The last two lines, in which the wind and the bird are indicated as witnesses, is an admirable instance of Morris’s method of indirect and subtle affirmation. (Noyes 61)

This relates, of course, to another famous passage of “La postulación de la realidad,” but it would have been impossible without the (almost illegible) reference to Noyes to know that this was the immediate source of Borges’s reflections on Tennyson and Morris in that essay. What Noyes calls Morris’s “more suggestive and reticent method” will become, thanks to Borges’s essay, one of the key concepts in the poetics of his narrative prose, of unending importance to his critics. At the same time, the source of the idea is very obscure, as we have just seen.

Another case: Borges’s nephew Miguel de Torre Borges published, in *Borges: fotografías y manuscritos*, a facsimile of the last two pages of the holograph manuscript of “Abenjacán el Bojarí,” in which there are tantalizing marginal references. Next to the line in the story when Dunraven says, describing the Minotaur, “Cabeza de toro tiene en medallas y esculturas el minotauro. Dante lo imaginó con cuerpo de toro y cabeza de hombre,” Borges refers to the following commentaries on *Inferno* XII (where the description of the Minotaur occurs): Scartazzini 97. Grabher I 144. Flaminio 172. And below, when Dunraven refers to the red gold of the Nibelungs, there is an additional marginal reference, this time to Carlyle, III, 125.

Dunraven, we should remember, is the poet in the dialogue on the cliffs of Cornwall, that (seemingly) uneventful evening in the early summer of 1914 (though of course Borges evokes a very precise historical moment that was to prove anything but uneventful: “Era la primera noche del verano de 1914; hartos de un mundo sin la dignidad del peligro, los amigos apreciaban la soledad de ese confín de Cornwall” [1: 722]). It is Dunraven who remembers that Dante imagined the Minotaur as the body of a bull crowned by the head of a man (and not vice versa). The lines from the twelfth canto of the *Inferno* that require that gloss are these:

Qual è quel toro che si siaccia in quella
c’ ha ricevuto già ‘l colpo mortale,
che gir non sa, ma qua e là saltella,

vid' io lo Minotauro far cotale;
e quello accorto gridò: 'Corri el varco:
mentre ch' è in furia è buon che tu ti cale.'

The issue, then, is that the Minotaur runs like a bull, not like a man. A few relevant commentaries (thanks to the remarkable website called the Dartmouth Dante Project): Francesco Flamini (one of the sources noted by Borges in the margin) writes in *I significati reconditi della Commedia di Dante e il suo fine supremo* (1904) that “il Minotauro è mezzo uomo e mezzo toro,” and adds: “Dante si figura il Minotauro come toro con testa d’uomo, interpretando liberamente il *semibovemque virum, semivirumque bovem* di Ovidio: le medaglie e le sculture antiche ci danno invece un uomo con testa di toro; cfr. *Mazzoni*, o. c., p. 14.” Carlo Grabher (another of Borges’s stated sources in his marginal note) writes: “Il Minotauro, mezzo uomo e mezzo bestia come i Centauri, bene incarna la natura umana imbestiata, la *matta bestialitate* che spinge alla violenza, punita appunto nel 7° cerchio. Dante, interpretando liberamente il *semibovemque virum, semivirumque bovem* di Ovidio (cfr. *Caco*, in *Inf.*, XXV, 25 e n.) rappresenta il mostro col corpo di toro e la testa d’uomo, mentre in medaglie e sculture antiche appare come un uomo dalla testa di toro (cfr. *G. Mazzoni, Lect. D.*).” Francesco Torraca (not cited by Borges here, but mentioned frequently in the preface to Dante in the *Clásicos Jackson* and in the *Nueve ensayos dantescos*) writes: “Dante ha posto acconciamente il Minotauro, mezzo uomo e mezzo bestia; ma la bestia prevale.”

Like the famous lines about the death of Laprida in “Poema conjetural,” “Como aquel capitán del Purgatorio / que, huyendo a pie y ensangrentando el llano, / fue cegado y tumbado por la muerte,” which include a translation of *Purgatorio* 5:99, “fuggendo a piede e ’nsanguinando il piano,” the description of the Minotaur is derived from a careful reading of Dante, but also of his commentators (since it is by no means obvious in the passage in the *Inferno* that the manner in which the Minotaur runs indicates that it has the body of a bull and the head of a man rather than vice versa). In fact, the line from “Abenjacán” in which Dunraven says that “Cabeza de toro tiene en medallas y esculturas el minotauro” is a translation from one of those commentaries, that of Carlo Grabher, when Grabher writes: “mentre in medaglie e sculture antiche appare come un uomo dalla testa di toro.” Without the marginal annotation it would be unimarginably difficult to

know that this line of the Borges story is a translation from this particular Dante commentary.

The Carlyle reference is equally precise. It derives from Carlyle's essay on the *Nibelungenlied* (in the *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*), a text which helped establish the medieval German poem as a canonical work in the mid-nineteenth century; Carlyle calls it "a precious national possession, recovered after six centuries of neglect, [which now] takes undisputed place among the sacred books of German literature" (8: 149). Carlyle writes:

His other grand adventure is with the two sons of the deceased King Nibelung, in Nibelungen-land; these two youths, to whom their father had bequeathed a Hoard or Treasure, beyond all price or computation, Siegfried, "riding by alone," found on the side of a mountain, in a state of great perplexity. They had brought out the Treasure from the cave where it usually lay; but how to part it was the difficulty; for, not to speak of gold, there were as many jewels alone "as twelve wagons in four days and nights, each going three journeys, could carry away"; nay, "however much you took from it, there was no diminution": besides, in real property, a Sword, Balmung, of great potency; a Divining-rod, "which gave power over every one"; and a *Tarnkappe* (or Cloak of Darkness), which not only rendered the wearer invisible, but also gave him twelve men's strength. (8: 164-65)

Dunraven says of Abenjacán's treasure: "Quizá no se encontraron monedas porque no quedaban monedas; los albañiles habrían agotado un caudal que, a diferencia del oro rojo de los Nibelungos, no era infinito. Tendríamos así a Abenjacán atravesando el mar para reclamar un tesoro dilapidado" (1: 729-30). The marginal reference to Carlyle helps us gloss the specific intertext here, and to understand better the pathos of the declaration about crossing the sea to reclaim a "dilapidated" treasure. (We should remember here the similarly precise use of "dilapidado" in "Las ruinas circulares," and the importance that Borges states in early essays on Quevedo and Browne about recovering the primordial force of certain words, where the etymology conceals a frozen metaphor, as here with the stones of Abenjacán's labyrinth.)

These marginal references in the manuscript are all the more interesting because of a reference early in "Abenjacán" to one of the most famous of marginalia. Dunraven's interlocutor, his friend and rival the mathematician Unwin, "había publicado un estudio sobre el teorema que Fermat no escribió al margen de una página de Diofanto" (1: 722). The reference

to Diophantes 2.8 leads of course to Fermat's "theorem" (more properly, Fermat's conjecture), which says "Cubus autem in duos cubos, aut quadratoquadratum in duos quadratoquadratos, et generaliter nullam in infinitum ultra quadratum potestatem in duos eiusdem nominis fas est dividere cuius rei demonstrationem mirabilem sane detexi. Hanc marginis exiguitas non caperet" ("It is impossible to separate a cube into two cubes, or a fourth power into two fourth powers, or in general, any power higher than the second into two like powers. I have discovered a truly marvelous proof of this, which this margin is too narrow to contain"). The conjecture that would not fit in the margin was not proven until 1995, meaning that the marginal note tantalized mathematicians for more than three hundred years. I am confident that some of Borges's tantalizing conjectures will have as long a life.

These references allow us to gloss the story in the same kind of detail that Borges employs in countless essays. But, alas, we have access to few manuscripts, and it is only by happenstance that these two pages of "Abenjacán," or the notes for "La postulación de la realidad" and "El arte narrativo y la magia," have been published in a form that makes it possible for real scholarly work to begin.

At the end of his 1949 introduction to Dante, Borges comments on some of the commentaries on Dante (he has already confessed that he has not read them all, and doubts whether anyone has), then concludes: "Bárbaramente se repite que los comentadores se interponen entre el lector y el libro, dislate que no merece refutación" (26). That is, the relation between reader and text should be mediated by commentaries, when these are available and are valuable. It is shameful that more than twenty years after Borges's death we still do not have an adequate critical edition, and that we have almost no access to the existing manuscripts. Our writer deserves better.

Dr. Menard insists that there is no sign that is without meaning: "Ni en graphologie, ni en psychologie il n'y a de petits signes, tous les signes acquérant leur importance suivant la façon dont on sait les observer, les interpréter et les rattacher aux causes générales" (142). Of interest to those who would relate the Borges story to local history and genealogy in the Nîmes and Montpellier region is the fact that Borges writes "Menard" without an accent; René Ventura notes that there are both "Menards" and

“Ménards” in Nîmes (76). Dr. Pierre Menard wrote his name without an accent, as does his son the psychoanalyst Augustin. Lafon, however, prefers “Ménard,” as do many of the French translators, since the latter is the more common form of the surname in France (and in Louisiana and Québec). Does it matter? Only if Borges tried (and I am convinced he tried very hard) to insert his character firmly into the intellectual life of a provincial city in southern France, suggesting an implicit relation to handwriting analysis and perhaps even to one of the more absurd versions of psychoanalysis. Ventura confesses his frustration in finding the “real” Pierre Menard, by which he seems to mean a twentieth-century French provincial intellectual who actually wrote the nineteen items listed as the “visible” works, or who attempted a rewriting of Cervantes’s masterpiece. He confesses near the end of his book:

Parti avec quelques avantages, (bien minces), celui de vivre à Nîmes et de connaître quelques personnes nommées Menard, l’enquête (inutile) m’a conduit vers une chimère, qui est devenue le présent texte et qu’il faut à présent conclure. (112)

And he recounts that his investigation was unsuccessful, with “plusieurs tentatives . . . demeurés infructueuses” (115). The search for the “real” Pierre Menard is no doubt chimerical and fruitless, but the search for the real in Borges’s texts will no doubt be one of the most fruitful paths for Borges criticism in the coming years.

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