

C. BELL-VILLADA : "Pierre Menard, Author of
The Quixote"

Reference Guide to

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SHORT FICTION

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ST. JAMES PRESS

Detroit London Washington D.C., 1994

mention of his rheumatism serves only to underline his avarice, "bent double" in pain for the sake of a piece of string.

Hauchecorne's obsession with proving that he has been unjustly accused over the theft of the purse is a perennial theme in Maupassant's stories, the self-prepossession and moral myopia of the inadequate individual. Monsieur Sacrement's life-long desire to be publically honoured in "The Decoration" is of the same order, even at the price of self-deceit and cuckoldry. The oblique illumination of Hauchecorne when he realises his dilemma is all the more painful for his realisation, and that of the reader, that there is nothing he can do to resolve his situation:

He returned home ashamed and indignant, choking with anger and embarrassment, all the more upset in that he was quite capable . . . of doing what he was accused of having done, and even of boasting about it. . . . He dimly realized that . . . it was impossible to prove his innocence, and the injustice of the suspicion cut him to the quick.

(translated by Roger Colet)

Maupassant has no need to add to Hauchecorne's own realisation of his folly, which haunts him into an early grave. As Percy Lubbock has said, he is rarely an intrusive narrator; "the scene he evokes for us is contemporaneous. . . . But the effect is that he is not there at all, because he is doing nothing that ostensibly requires any judgement, nothing that reminds us of his presence . . . the story occupies us, the moving scene, and nothing else."

Reading of Hauchecorne's ludicrous demise reminds one that Maupassant was a soulmate of W.H. Auden's "Epitaph on a Tyrant" in at least one respect: "He knew human folly like the back of his hand." Like so many of his stories, "A Piece of String" presents human behaviour at its worst. Although I mentioned Bruegel earlier, perhaps the closer resemblance is to Hieronymous Bosch, the story being akin to "The Garden of Earthly Delights" brought to life; vanity transformed into absurdity, wordly ambition reduced to facile farce.

—Simon Baker

PIERRE MENARD, AUTHOR OF THE *QUIXOTE*
(Pierre Menard, autor del *Quixote*)
by Jorge Luis Borges, 1944

Among the short fictions that brought renown to Jorge Luis Borges, his story "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quixote*" ("Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*") is something of a legend. Conceived and started in a hospital bed, where Borges lay convalescing from a home accident that had brought him near-death, it was his first major narrative piece, published in *Sur*, May 1939. The story, gathered thereafter in the volume *Ficciones*, went on to enjoy an astounding influence among literary people, its clever thoughts giving rise to aesthetic theories that went well beyond anything Borges had probably intended.

"Pierre Menard" is a prime example of the "essay-fiction" genre fashioned by Borges. It presents itself as a posthumous literary appreciation of the recently deceased

Menard, as told by an unnamed and typically snobbish French rightist. The list he gives of Menard's published works shows the dearly departed to have been a narrow, claustrophobic sort whose interests lay chiefly in self-enclosed fields such as chess, metrics, symbolic logic, and the retranslating of translated books back to their originals. One of the titles tells all: *Les problèmes d'un problème* (The Problems of a Problem).

Menard's unpublished masterwork, however, was the fulfillment of his fond ambition, namely, to write—independently, and verbatim (and not copy)—*Don Quixote*. The project, we are informed, went through thousands of drafts, but Menard finally came up with some two chapters. How he got there is a complex matter. At first he had contemplated reliving Cervantes's life, but soon realized that his aim was to write *Don Quixote* not as a 17th-century Spaniard, but as Menard the 20th-century Frenchman. In the meantime he devoured all of Cervantes's works—save for the *Quixote*. The latter he had already read at the age of twelve, and thus existed in his mind much as an unwritten work of art does, furnishing him the initial germ for his "creation."

The main substance and wit of the story are in the prissy narrator's subsequent "commentary." To him, Menard's *Quixote* is actually more impressive than Cervantes's, inasmuch as the Frenchman was writing in a language not his own and moreover was encumbered with all the quaint stereotypes (conquistadors, gypsies, *Carmen*) of later European vintage. Moreover, one of the passages that Menard "wrote" is the mad knight's spirited defense of arms over letters—easy enough for Cervantes, who had been a soldier, but not so for a bookish, reclusive Menard. The narrator deftly attributes this choice to influence from Nietzsche and also to Menard's ironizing habit of saying things the opposite of what he really felt.

The most famous moment in the piece comes when the narrator compares two brief passages dealing with the subject of "truth," one from Cervantes and the other from Menard. Though the two extracts seem identical, Menard's, he argues, is actually the better one, because Cervantes's is mere commonplace rhetoric of the time, whereas Menard echoes the ideas of his contemporary pragmatist William James. To cap the story, the eulogist sums up Menard's real achievement, a revolutionary new technique of reading in disregard of chronological sequence or authorial fact—for example, thinking of the *Aeneid* as coming before the *Odyssey*, or the *Imitation of Christ* as written by Céline or Joyce. On this wild speculation the piece ends.

"Pierre Menard" is several things at once. On the most basic level it is a broad satire of the debates, polemics, and tempests-in-teapots of literary criticism. The narrator fittingly deploys such typical literary criticism "weapons" as erudite allusion, high sophistry, and thick irony, and along the way provides vivid instances of critical subtypes: ideological aesthetics, literary memoir, philological enumeration, genetic explanation (how Menard's *Quixote* originated), influence study (the role of Nietzsche), historical scholarship, and evaluative criticism. The choice of the *Quixote* is not accidental. Cervantes's masterwork itself starts out as a satire of genre, and his mock-romance has since been subjected to every conceivable interpretation, from didactic to Christian or existentialist. Menard's eulogist's is only the latest installment in a long series.

At the same time Borges's spoof raises weighty points concerning the place of literature in an age of decline. Coming as he does at the end of French Symbolism, poor Menard can only write what has been written before, though with irony and on a Quixotic scale. Such a

pessimistic prospect has in fact been part of the 20th-century climate, and parodying past works is among the outstanding devices in modern art: Joyce's *Ulysses* and the *Odyssey*, Duchamp and the *Mona Lisa*, Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* and Pergolesi, to cite but a few examples. "Pierre Menard" in this respect also inaugurates what we now see as the post-Modern sensibility, where in all art tends to ironic quotation, and history is flattened out into a timeless present.

In its original intent, of course, Borges's piece was largely humorous. He was devising a complex mental joke, not propounding a new aesthetic. Nonetheless the "ideas" in this story were eventually to be picked up on and further elaborated by influential men of letters. The French critic Gérard Genette in his essay "L'utopie littéraire" (1966) bases an entire theory of ahistorical literary space on "Pierre Menard." Alain Robbe-Grillet in *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963, *For a New Novel*) expressly defends Borges's (actually Menard's friend's) notion that two identical texts can mean different things. And the American novelist John Barth in his well-known essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) takes "Pierre Menard" as a starting point for what he, Barth, sees as the necessity of parody in our time. (Some of Barth's own novels, in turn, are parodies of 19th-century narrative.)

None of this, of course, could have been foreseen by Borges as he imagined "Pierre Menard" within his hospital room. Still, the comments and quasi-manifestoes elicited by this little piece speak for its intellectual richness, its power to quicken the mind and suggest possibilities. "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" is a funny story that inspires serious thoughts—much as is the case with the first *Quixote* of Cervantes.

—Gene H. Bell-Villada

PKHENTZ

by Abram Terts, 1966

"Pkhentz" was the last of Andrei Siniavski's writings to be sent out to the West under the pseudonym Abram Terts before his arrest in 1965. Although it was referred to at the trial, it did not figure in his indictment. The story was published in English and Polish translation in 1966 and in the original Russian in 1967. It was included in the anthology *Soviet Short Stories* in 1968 and is one of his best-known works. Perhaps not his most accomplished work, its simple story line and well judged blend of pathos and grotesque humour make it accessible and immediately appealing.

Because of its subject—the visitation of a creature from outer space—"Pkhentz" belongs to the category of science fiction. However, it is characteristic of much of Terts's writing in that it evades conventional classification. Terts is a self-consciously literary writer who makes frequent play with intertextual reference, pastiche, and parody. In "Kroshka Tsores" ("Little Jinx"), for example, he inverts the plot of a Hoffmann story, "Little Zaches." In "Pkhentz" he reverses the plot line of H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898). The point of view is changed to that of a harmless alien, the sole survivor of a galactic accident who for years has been living incognito in a Moscow communal flat. He is more akin to a plant than a human or

animal, needing only warmth and water as nourishment, but his many-limbed and many-eyed form is maimed and blinded because he was bound up for so long in the disguise of a hunchback. What we are reading is the irregular diary of this character, Andrei Kazimirovich Sushinski, in which he records his failing health and his final decision to use his savings to return to the Siberian forests, where he originally landed, and perish there.

Obviously, the novelty of Terts's approach is somewhat lost on a generation of cinema-goers familiar with the movie *E.T.* The similarities between the story and the film may or may not be purely coincidental: E.T.'s disorientation and fear at being stranded on a strange planet, his anxiety about returning "Home," the danger that he will become a victim of scientific curiosity, the final departure from the forest clearing. But Terts's interest could not be further removed from Spielberg's sentimental reminder of the value of retaining a child's imaginative understanding and communication skills in a depersonalised, high-tech adult world. Still less is he interested here in exploring the utopian, dystopian possibilities of the science-fiction genre. In "Pkhentz" the focus is firmly on the present. It is a story of alienation and lack of communication in which the science-fiction convention functions as a device of defamiliarisation. As such, it is closer to the literary tradition of the foreign visitor or traveller from an antique land—like Le Sage's *Le Diable Boiteux*, Montesquieu's *Les Lettres Persanes*, and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*—than to classic science fiction.

"Pkhentz" is an example of fantastic realism, which Terts advocated at the end of his essay "What is Socialist Realism?"; he called it the art best suited to conveying the grotesque anomalies of Soviet life. The last page of the essay, like "Pkhentz," was sent out separately to the West. At his trial Siniavski acknowledged that it was his own literary credo. In his final plea he quoted a sentence from "Pkhentz," which he said could apply to himself: "Just because I'm different must you immediately curse me?" Siniavski slips small but unmistakable autobiographical touches into the assumed identity of his outsider. The assumed name echoes his own and hints at his Polish ancestry. Self-deprecation and a tendency to conceal his feelings behind a protective casing of irony is very much a part of Siniavski's writing manner. It is a trait he recognises, as he has written in his observations on Russian culture and as he commented at his trial, as being typical of the Russian character. But what he is also challenging here, with his sympathetic portrayal of a monstrosity, are conventional notions of beauty in art. In a poignant central scene the alien (it is tempting to call him Pkhentz, but this is in fact a cherished remembered word from his lost language, denoting some indescribable beautiful warm radiance) uncovers himself and bathes his strange argus-eyed form in view of a mirror. He says "It's no good measuring my beauty against your own ugliness. I am more beautiful than you and more normal." This is the voice of Terts the embattled romantic, stoically echoing Victor Hugo's declaration of the inseparability of the sublime and the grotesque in art. Yet in the context of this story, the romantic view is challenged both from without, by the unrelenting harshness of everyday reality, and from within, by the author's own difficulty in reconciling the animal and the spiritual sides of human nature, the body and the soul. From the alien's estranged viewpoint, practically everything he encounters is threatening and repulsive. He visits a fellow hunchback whom he erroneously suspects of being a fellow alien (in fact, the hunchback, in a subtle yet pointed allusion to Soviet anti-Semitism, is an "alien," of sorts—