

SOME NOTES ON "PIERRE MENARD"

James E. Irby
Princeton University

One of the Borges texts that has always perplexed me the most, that has drawn me back to it most often and most often insinuated itself into other readings, is "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*". Its force was especially strong when I worked my way repeatedly through Roland Barthes' *S/Z*, which now seems to me a set of Menardian "writings" of Balzac's tale, and it was also strong when I pieced together for myself one of the common pretexts for Barthes and other post-structuralists: the drafts and fragments of Nietzsche known as *The Will to Power*. What I offer now are some notes on "Pierre Menard..." in the light of those readings and rereadings. Though I cite the word at one point, I am not talking about "influence." I have no conclusions; eventually, my notes will just stop.

"Pierre Menard..." sets forth the paradox that Menard, a French Symbolist, has written (not transcribed, but produced independently) some fragments of *Don Quixote* which are identical in wording to Cervantes' text and yet totally different and much richer in meaning. How are we to understand this? The simplest way would be to replace the verb "write" with "read": Pierre Menard *reads* the *Quixote* so carefully, so resourcefully, that he leaves every word in place but accounts for it according to his Symbolist way of thinking, hence the simultaneous "sameness" and "difference." This would domesticate some of the strangeness and, in the process, generally and plausibly assimilate this text to the

current post-structuralist view that reading and writing are aspects of the same activity: to write a text is to offer a reading of one or more previous texts, to read a text is to write or trace in mind and memory one or more subsequent texts, neither aspect being separable from an ongoing universal network—or textwork—of signs which traverse both readers and writers and are always “already there” and other than themselves. See, for example, Barthes’ statement in *S/Z* that “I write my reading” and the whole section—entitled “Reading, Forgetting”—where it is found.

But such a replacement of verbs only transposes the strangeness (to this post-structuralist view as well as to the Menardian writing one could apply what Borges once said about the idealism of Berkeley: “to understand it is easy; what is difficult is to think within its limits”) and, besides, it neglects the surprising strategy with which Borges unfolds his text. Cast in the guise of a commentary, “Pierre Menard ...” thoroughly confounds the premises of all traditional commentary: that the author has authority and priority, that the reader’s status is subsequent and subservient, and that a text has distinct boundaries and consistency and an ultimately representational—i.e., truthful—nature. Menard’s commentator suggests in his last paragraph that Menard’s *Don Quixote* is perhaps *unintentionally* a reading, as if he—the commentator—were adding an afterthought and as if the super-lucid Menard had not always calculated the furthest consequences of his moves: a suggestion reminiscent of the closing remark of “Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain,” about offering the vain and absent-minded reader deliberately imperfect plots, so he can think *he* invented them. Who is the vain reader here, Menard’s commentator or us? The commentator certainly begins as one, opening with his pedantic, bigoted and racist claims to possess the only truth about Menard’s work. But what happens along the way, where has our snob gone by the end, when his commentary calmly and ecumenically proposes we read the *De imitatione Christi* as if it had been written by the anti-Semite Céline or the renegade Catholic Joyce? This, then, would be the “truth” of Menard’s work: the truth of the “deliberate anachronism and the

erroneous attribution...whose applications are infinite,” the truth of the reversible commentary and commentator (like Menard’s article on chess, like his opinion of Valéry and—possibly—of the dear Countess of Bagnoregio as well), the truth of identical yet totally different passages on truth laid side by side, the truth of “reconstructing” Menard’s destroyed notebooks (an abyss that might be no deeper than the gaps between each word of *Don Quixote* that Menard reasoned together), the truth of any reading—any text—we can devise with these elements, instantly other, instantly given over to an endless play of permutations. This is more than perplexity, more than strangeness, and a dire corrective for academic note takers.

Another question: why the combination of a French Symbolist and *Don Quixote*? As for a sense of the Symbolist, consider Valéry’s “Lettre sur Mallarmé” the pursuit of the totally significant text, calculated and revised and re-revised in every detail, seeking to make each poem “a marvel of reciprocal combinations,” “a balance of intrinsic forces,” and moving toward the formulation of the principles of all texts, of all systems of ideas; the rigorous avoidance of all facility, all readymade solutions, valuing the relentless effort and lucidity of the writer as martyr more than the work itself, which may exist only negatively amid endless drafts and in an ideal of unattainable perfection (“an atrocious and dangerous idea for Literature,” Valéry casually observes). To be sure, Menard signifies not only an extreme instance of these endeavors but also their parody: such efforts to disappear into a few fragments of an existing and alien text! The catalogue of his “visible” work exhibits the same ambiguity, the same instability. On the one hand, we see in it his repeated study of the most general systems of permutability, of *translation* in the broadest sense (projects for universal languages, Boole’s symbolic logic, Leibniz’s *Characteristica universalis*, Llull’s *Ars magna generalis*, the theory of chess, the other than logical patterns governing prose, and the perennially variable arguments against Zeno’s paradox, which negates all progressions by endlessly *expanding* them). On the other hand, we see in the catalogue Menard’s

undoing of one of Symbolism's most cherished and arduous products by turning against it its own method (Valéry strove to make his *Cimetière marin* a necessary elaboration of the underdeveloped decasyllable, "to raise this *Ten* to the power of *Twelve*," and weave into its texture with equal necessity and elaboration "the most constant themes of my emotional and intellectual life"; Menard perversely transposes it all into alexandrines). And, finally, we also see in the catalogue Menard's undoing of his own "visible" work into invisibility: the literal translation of Quevedo's literal translation of St. Francis of Sales, so "literal" that it can't be found. What catalogue can survive items like that?

Now, why *Don Quixote* and how alien is it? It is a novel, of course, and we know what Valéry said about novels; it is also a vast sprawling novel in mingled styles, completely at variance with Symbolist tenets of concision, unity and decorum. In that sense it is like a random piece of reality, a chaotic *donnée*, to be passed through Symbolist grids and given order and "necessity." But, again, even though the Symbolists were fond of challenges, what a monstrously parodistic notion: the total organization of *Don Quixote*, down to the last word, after the fashion of a poem by Mallarmé!

Menard sees the *Quixote* as "contingent," as "unnecessary;" therefore, he can write it without "falling into a tautology." At the same time, it "interests him deeply," though he doesn't say why. Would this be precisely because of its contingency or because the *Quixote* is also a permutation of texts, a parodistic translation and extension of other novels, a compendium and critique, a book of books? But, after asking these questions, I suspect that, in "Pierre Menard....," Cervantes' novel cannot be exclusively one thing or another, any more than the commentator's discourse can. At one point, it is said that Menard did not look at the chapters he "wrote" and, at another point, that he *used* them to control his variants. This indeterminacy, by the way, seems not unlike that of Barthes' definition, in *S/Z*, of "writerly" and "readerly" texts, to which I will return in a moment.

It is interesting to note, however, which chapters Menard "essayed." All are in the first part: chapter nine, where

the story is broken off, while Cide Hamete Benengeli's manuscript is found and translated; chapter thirty-eight, the discourse on arms and letters; and a fragment—we don't know which—of twenty-two, the incident with the galley slaves. All involve translation of some kind: the debate on arms and letters coordinates two arguments, two languages, precisely in order to favor one over the other, and the galley slaves' jargon must be explained to Don Quixote. All involve as well some interruption of narrative: in chapter twenty-two, Ginés de Pasamonte says his autobiographical novel isn't finished yet because his life isn't finished, an ironic parallel to Menard and his fragmentary writing, for the completion of which he claimed he should merely need to be immortal. More than a direct correspondence between Menard's "visible" work and *Don Quixote*, these parallels imply an analogy of process, a set of variations or chain of readings in *Don Quixote* being continued by Menard, according to a productive rather than a mimetic model. But it is well to note a further paradox: Menard's writing of *Don Quixote* tends toward a totalization of its meaning, a multiple accounting for its every detail, an intensification of its status as a book, and yet, at the same time, it destroys the book as book and as narrative, not just because only a few fragments were done, but because the multiplicity of reasoning disperses even the smallest units in different directions. Consider just the commentator's gloss on Menard's version of the brief lines concerning "truth, whose mother is history" etc., which breaks them into both pragmatist and anti-pragmatist segments. Consider also how the commentator finds in another chapter never written by Menard echoes of his "style" and "voice," thus momentarily suggesting a virtual sense of completion in his fragments. But the reminiscence immediately finds another such echo in a line by Shakespeare, another author, another book: the process has no boundaries. In this perspective, there are no authors, no books. I am reminded of that remark in Derrida's *De la grammatologie* about how what he calls the "aphoristic" power of writing, of *écriture* (which is "reading" as well), disrupts and ultimately destroys the idea of the book as a natural totality. And, to return to my earlier point of

departure, I am also reminded of Barthes' insistence, in *S/Z*, that there is no totality of a text with respect to which any of our readings can be pertinent or impertinent, "right" or "wrong"; the validity of a reading lies in its systematic character, which, as Barthes says and "Pierre Menard..." vividly demonstrates, has no terminus. And, besides, we too—that is, our consciousness, our identity—are textually defined by the unknown and unknowable sum of all our readings and therefore we cannot stand outside the textual process and put limits on it: it has no origins either in us or elsewhere. Barthes states: "This 'I' which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or, more precisely, lost (whose origin is lost)." This would be another way of understanding Menard's catalogue of "visible" works: his "identity" is a list of texts on texts, shading off into "invisibility."

The possible nature of Menard's destroyed notes and drafts is suggested by this remark attributed to him:

My solitary game is governed by two polar laws. The first permits me to essay variations of a formal or psychological type; the second obliges me to sacrifice those variations to the "original" text and reason out this annihilation in an irrefutable manner...

His worksheets, then, "lead" (or "return") to the words in the novel by some process of permutation, a process either implied by a set of drafts or made explicit in the form of a transformational argument (remember that the universal languages studied by Menard, such as Leibniz's *Characteristica universalis*, offer the means of translating any idea, any text, into any other). If such drafts or arguments were superimposed upon, or interpolated into, Cervantes' text, the result would resemble *S/Z*: the text of Balzac with Barthes' discussion interrupting it constantly, sometimes at every word, to show what sequence of reasoning, what "code," accounts for this word, this sentence, this segment of discourse: how does one get from "this" to "that," why is this different, why is that the same, why does this repeat? This is what Barthes calls a text in "slow motion" or what, in the language of mechanical drawings, could also be called an "exploded"

text: a text opened up at many points, read back and forth so as to deny its naturalness, to draw it out of its internal (and external) chronology and thereby to *interpret* it, which in Barthes' usage (I will mention another usage in a moment) does not mean giving the text some meaning or other but rather finding what kind of *plurality* it is made of. And this is what, on a small scale, we see in the scrutiny of Cervantes' and Menard's "identical" fragments on truth and history, the second "almost infinitely richer" than the first because of being "slowed down" and anachronistically read, rotating the key words "truth" and "history" this way and that.

Barthes postulates two extremes of permutability in literary texts: the "writerly" (*le scriptible*), which is that of total plurality, and the "readerly" (*le lisible*), which is that of total fixity. Two extremes that only exist in theory: in practice all texts are more or less one and the other. (At times, however, Barthes seems to suggest that texts are not "writerly" or "readerly" by virtue of inherent traits but rather by virtue of the way in which they are *read*: this is the indeterminacy I referred to earlier and can only mention now in passing.) Balzac's story "Sarrasine" has a limited plurality: the details and small segments of its text signify in terms of several alternating or simultaneous codes, but, predominantly, these are used to maintain certain conventions of representational—or "realistic"—sequentiality. Barthes repeatedly refers to the story's deceptively "natural" flow, to the devices used to make its discourse seem much more homogeneous than it really is.

By comparison, the text of "Pierre Menard..." is highly discursive, discontinuous and ridden with ellipses and shifts of perspective, small and large, one of the largest of which, as I pointed out earlier, is the reversible nature of the commentary itself. Perhaps, for Barthes, a highly plural text would be like Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*. "Pierre Menard..." is not as "exploded" as that, but its plurality is great. One of its pluralizing features would be its play of metacommentary, which is not found even in *S/Z* itself. There is, furthermore, a deep gap or absence in "Pierre Menard...": the obliterated text(s) of Menard's drafts and notebooks, the nature of which is

only implied tangentially or metonymically, in terms of productive models. The notebooks, perhaps approaching the pure activity of variation that Barthes calls the triumphantly plural text, cannot be represented: they suggest endless conjectures. Barthes says that such a plural work "demolishes any criticism, which, as soon as it is produced, mingles with it." I think this is a good way of indicating what one feels in trying to write about "Pierre Menard...": it seems to anticipate and mock one's every move.

Now, in this fable of reading and writing called "Pierre Menard..." along with the paradoxes, the parody, the reversals and the absurd humor I've mentioned, there is to me something else that I can only name as *pathos*: a painful lucid determination to write with the force of exact coherence, in the face of death and annihilation, but only to have one's writing ground up in the universal machine of textuality, and no one knows to what end. This is a very frequent tone or quality in Borges, which does not appear, I think, in Derrida or Barthes, whatever the affinities between their thought and his, and not just because he is a "narrator" and they "philosophers" or "critics" ("Pierre Menard..." alone is sufficient to show how dubious those distinctions are), but it is found in what I called earlier a common pretext of theirs, Nietzsche, whose name, it so happens, appears in the text of "Pierre Menard..." And so I'd like to end my notes with a few remarks on that name, that citation, and a few contexts that it suggests.

When the commentator compares Menard's version of chapter thirty-eight with Cervantes', he mentions four possible interpretations for this Symbolist's surprising exaltation of arms over letters, the third of which (ascribed to the intriguing Baroness of Bacourt) is "the influence of Nietzsche," an opinion the commentator judges to be "irrefutable," though he modestly adds as the fourth interpretation that we should not forget how inclined Menard was to state ideas *opposite* to those he preferred. The layers of irony are so inextricable here (what possible meaning could the word "irrefutable" have in this text?) that it may seem senseless to single out a mere name for scrutiny. But let's try. Let's discard the

simple, all-too-simple notions of Nietzsche as vitalist or as self-contradictor. Let's trace a modestly Menardian graph (after all, Menard wrote on graph paper), using "Nietzsche" as one of its points (though I realize that no name, no word, is a single point). Another point would be the nearby noun "interpretation," so charged with Nietzschean connotations, and another, a page later, the adjective "nihilistic," similarly charged and also prominently placed, as follows:

Fame is a form of incomprehension, perhaps the worst. There is nothing new in these nihilistic verifications; what is singular is the determination Menard derived from them.

And yet another point would be not a word but the last of the statements attributed to Menard:

Every man should be capable of all ideas and I understand that in the future this will be the case.

In certain fragments of *The Will to Power* (especially nos. 481, 556, 600, and 604), Nietzsche outlines his theory that there are no facts, no things, no values, but only interpretations in flux; not even the self or subjectivity exist, since they are only further interpretations devised by the activity of interpretation, a form of the will to power in constant becoming, in a world whose disturbing and enigmatic character can never be interpreted away. In other fragments (notably at the beginning of the collection) he recommends that nihilism as disbelief be intensified to a total denial of truth in order possibly to accede to a "divine way of thinking" (no. 15), to a total command of all ideas as interpretations. Parallel to these passages is the one called "On Self Overcoming" in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, where the prophet exhorts "those who are wisest" to know their will as "a will to the thinkability of all beings, ...to make all being thinkable." And this, with its relentless thrust toward the future, bears the mark of Nietzsche's crucible of the Eternal Return—the test of reliving and *willing* every detail of our lives, over and over again—, so vividly evoked by Borges in *Historia de la eternidad* as a nightmarish approximation of immortality, of selflessness. Borges' later story "The Immortal" is clearly a meditation on such Nietzschean lucidities and ordeals; I suggest that "Pierre

Menard..." implies a similar meditation, which serves to extend even further the already extreme Symbolist method it cites.

"Pierre Menard..." begins parodistically as a claim to preserve the true memory of a dead writer; by its end it has stated that all fame is misunderstanding and proposed a total freedom of interpretation; the experiment it outlines bears upon *Don Quixote*, the novel of reading novels, so long all but unread in any rigorous sense, here to be totally, minutely, systematically *mis-read*. Nietzsche has been one of the most grossly misrepresented writers in recent history; not long after writing "Pierre Menard..." Borges devoted two brief articles, still uncollected in any of his books, to vindicating him with textual arguments. The first article, "Algunos pareceres de Nietzsche," published in February 1940, refutes the vulgar image of Nietzsche as racist and proto-Nazi by quoting from his posthumously published notebooks, which, Borges observes, justify with impartial theories his tendentious publications, the most notorious and equivocal of which is *Zarathustra*. The second article, "El propósito de *Zarathustra*," published in October 1944, attempts to account for this book's excesses and obscurity by claiming that it was fashioned after the model of prophetic scriptures of the Orient as a deliberately overbearing and contradictory text for successive generations of future exegetes to discuss, vindicate and enrich, line by line. Borges states: "Nietzsche condescended to a book poorer than himself; he anticipated that others would supply what he left unsaid," a strategy complementary to Menard's—the contingent text already implying its infinite enrichment...and annihilation—, with the difference, of course, that ~~the~~ apochryphal and selfless Menard never has, even for an instant, a book of his own, and exists only as a limitless activity (*our* activity, and yet never really ours, either) that destroys and extends *all* texts, sacred, classic and trivial.

This is where my notes stop.