

Jorge Luis Borges

Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote

To Silvina Ocampo

The visible works left by this novelist are easily and briefly enumerated. It is therefore impossible to forgive the omissions and additions perpetrated by Madame Henri Bachelier in a fallacious catalogue that a certain newspaper, whose Protestant tendencies are no secret, was inconsiderate enough to inflict on its wretched readers - even though they are few and Calvinist, if not Masonic and circumcised. Menard's true friends regarded this catalogue with alarm, and even with a certain sadness. It is as if yesterday we were gathered together before the final marble and the fateful cypresses, and already Error is trying to tarnish his Memory . . . Decidedly, a brief rectification is inevitable.

I am certain that it would be very easy to challenge my meager authority. I hope, nevertheless, that I will not be prevented from mentioning two important testimonials. The Baroness de Bacourt (at whose unforgettable vendredis I had the honor of becoming acquainted with the late lamented poet) has seen fit to approve these lines. The Countess de Bagnoregio, one of the most refined minds in the Principality of Monaco (and now of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, since her recent marriage to the international philanthropist Simon Kautsch who, alas, has been so slandered by the victims of his disinterested handiwork) has sacrificed to "truth and death" (those are her words) that majestic reserve which distinguishes her, and in an open letter published in the magazine Luxe also grants me her consent. These authorizations, I believe, are not insufficient.

I have said that Menard's visible lifework is easily enumerated. Having carefully examined his private archives, I have been able to verify that it consists of the following:

- a) A symbolist sonnet which appeared twice (with variations) in the magazine La Conque (the March and October issues of 1899).
- b) A monograph on the possibility of constructing a poetic vocabulary of concepts that would not be synonyms or periphrases of those which make up ordinary language, "but ideal objects created by means of common agreement and destined essentially to fill poetic needs" (Nimes, 1901).
- c) A monograph on "certain connections or affinities" among the ideas of Descartes, Leibnitz and John Wilkins (Nimes, 1903).
- d) A monograph on the *Characteristica Universalis* of Leibnitz (Nimes, 1904).
- e) A technical article on the possibility of enriching the game of chess by means of eliminating one of the rooks' pawns. Menard proposes, recommends, disputes, and ends by rejecting this innovation.
- f) A monograph on the *Ars Magna Generalis* of Ramon Lull (Nimes, 1906).

g) A translation with prologue and notes of the Libro de la invencion y ante del juego del axedrez by Ruy Lopez de Segura (Paris, 1907).

h) The rough draft of a monograph on the symbolic logic of George Boole.

i) An examination of the metric laws essential to French prose, illustrated with examples from Saint-Simon (Revue des langues romanes, Montpellier, October, 1909).

j) An answer to Luc Durtain (who had denied the existence of such laws) illustrated with examples from Luc Durtain (Revue des langues romanes, Montpellier, December, 1909).

k) A manuscript translation of the Aguja de navegar cultos of Quevedo, entitled La boussole des precieux.

l) A preface to the catalogue of the exposition of lithographs by Carolus Hourcade (Nimes, 1914).

m) His work, Les problemes d'un probleme (Paris, 1917), which takes up in chronological order the various solutions of the famous problem of Achilles and the tortoise. Two editions of this book have appeared so far; the second has as an epigraph Leibnitz' advice "Ne craignez point, monsieur, la tortue," and contains revisions of the chapters dedicated to Russell and Descartes.

n) An obstinate analysis of the "syntactic habits" of Toulet (N.R.F., March, 1921). I remember that Menard used to declare that censoring and praising were sentimental operations which had nothing to do with criticism.

o) A transposition into Alexandrines of Le Cimetiere marin of Paul Valery (N.R.F., January, 1928).

p) An invective against Paul Valery in the Journal for the Suppression of Reality of Jacques Reboul. (This invective, it should be stated parenthetically, is the exact reverse of his true opinion of Valery. The latter understood it as such, and the old friendship between the two was never endangered.)

q) A "definition" of the Countess of Bagnoregio in the "victorious volume"- the phrase is that of another collaborator, Gabriele d'Annunzio - which this lady publishes yearly to rectify the inevitable falsifications of journalism and to present "to the world and to Italy" an authentic effigy of her person, which is so exposed (by reason of her beauty and her activities) to erroneous or hasty interpretations.

r) A cycle of admirable sonnets for the Baroness de Bacourt (1934).

s) A manuscript list of verses which owe their effectiveness to punctuation.<1>

Up to this point (with no other omission than that of some vague, circumstantial sonnets for the hospitable, or greedy, album of Madame Henri Bachelier) we have the visible part of Menard's works in chronological order. Now I will pass over to that other part, which is

subterranean, interminably heroic, and unequalled, and which is also - oh, the possibilities inherent in the man! - inconclusive. This work, possibly the most significant of our time, consists of the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of Part One of Don Quixote and a fragment of the twenty-second chapter. I realize that such an affirmation seems absurd; but the justification of this "absurdity" is the primary object of this note.<2>

Two texts of unequal value inspired the undertaking. One was that philological fragment of Novalis - No. 2005 of the Dresden edition - which outlines the theme of total identification with a specific author. The other was one of those parasitic books which places Christ on a boulevard, Hamlet on the Cannebiere and Don Quixote on Wall Street. Like any man of good taste, Menard detested these useless carnivals, only suitable - he used to say - for evoking plebeian delight in anachronism, or (what is worse) charming us with the primary idea that all epochs are the same, or that they are different. He considered more interesting, even though it had been carried out in a contradictory and superficial way, Daudet's famous plan: to unite in one figure, Tartarin, the Ingenious Gentleman and his squire . . . Any insinuation that Menard dedicated his life to the writing of a contemporary Don Quixote is a calumny of his illustrious memory.

He did not want to compose another Don Quixote - which would be easy - but the Don Quixote. It is unnecessary to add that his aim was never to produce a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy it. His admirable ambition was to produce pages which would coincide - word for word and line for line - with those of Miguel de Cervantes.

"My intent is merely astonishing," he wrote me from Bayonne on December 30th, 1934. "The ultimate goal of a theological or metaphysical demonstration - the external world, God, chance, universal forms - are no less anterior or common than this novel which I am now developing. The only difference is that philosophers publish in pleasant volumes the intermediary stages of their work and that I have decided to lose them." And, in fact, not one page of a rough draft remain to bear witness to this work of years.

The initial method he conceived was relatively simple: to know Spanish well, to re-embrace the Catholic faith, to fight against Moors and Turks, to forget European history between 1602 and 1918, and to be Miguel de Cervantes. Pierre Menard studied this procedure (I know that he arrived at a rather faithful handling of seventeenth-century Spanish) but rejected it as too easy. Rather because it was impossible, the reader will say! I agree, but the undertaking was impossible from the start, and of all the possible means of carrying it out, this one was the least interesting. To be, in the twentieth century, a popular novelist of the seventeenth seemed to him a diminution. To be, in some way, Cervantes and to arrive at Don Quixote seemed to him less arduous - and consequently less interesting - than to continue being Pierre Menard and to arrive at Don Quixote through the experiences of Pierre Menard. (This conviction, let it be said in passing, forced him to exclude the autobiographical prologue of the second part of Don Quixote. To include this prologue would have meant creating another personage - Cervantes - but it would also have meant presenting Don Quixote as the work of this personage and not of Menard. He naturally

denied himself such an easy solution.) "My undertaking is not essentially difficult," I read in another part of the same letter. "I would only have to be immortal in order to carry it out." Shall I confess that I often imagine that he finished it and that I am reading Don Quixote - the entire work. - as if Menard had conceived it? Several nights ago, while leafing through Chapter XXVI - which he had never attempted - I recognized our friend's style and, as it were, his voice in this exceptional phrase: the nymphs of the rivers, mournful and humid Echo. This effective combination of two adjectives, one moral and the other physical, reminded me of a line from Shakespeare which we discussed one afternoon:

Where a malignant and turbaned Turk . . .

Why precisely Don Quixote, our reader will ask. Such a preference would not have been inexplicable in a Spaniard; but it undoubtedly was in a symbolist from Nimes, essentially devoted to Poe, who engendered Baudelaire, who engendered Mallarme, who engendered Valery, who engendered Edmond Teste. The letter quoted above clarifies this point. "Don Quixote," Menard explains, "interests me profoundly, but it does not seem to me to have been - how shall I say it - inevitable. I cannot imagine the universe without the interjection of Edgar Allan Poe

Ah, bear in mind this garden was enchanted!

or without the Bateau ivre or the Ancient Mariner, but I know that I am capable of imagining it without Don Quixote. (I speak, naturally, of my personal capacity, not of the historical repercussions of these works.) Don Quixote is an accidental book, Don Quixote is unnecessary. I can premeditate writing, I can write it, without incurring a tautology. When I was twelve or thirteen years old I read it, perhaps in its entirety. Since then I have reread several chapters attentively, but not the ones I am going to undertake. I have likewise studied the entremeses, the comedies, the Galatea, the exemplary novels, and the undoubtedly laborious efforts of Persiles y Sigismunda and the Viaje at Parnaso . . . My general memory of Don Quixote, simplified by forgetfulness and indifference, is much the same as the imprecise, anterior image of a book not yet written. Once this image (which no one can deny me in good faith) has been postulated, my problems are undeniably considerably more difficult than those which Cervantes faced. My affable precursor did not refuse the collaboration of fate; he went along composing his immortal work a little a la diable, swept along by inertias of language and invention. I have contracted the mysterious duty of reconstructing literally his spontaneous work. My solitary game is governed by two polar laws. The first permits me to attempt variants of a formal and psychological nature; the second obliges me to sacrifice them to the 'original' text and irrefutably to rationalize this annihilation . . . To these artificial obstacles one must add another congenital one. To compose Don Quixote at the beginning of the seventeenth century was a reasonable, necessary and perhaps inevitable undertaking; at the beginning of the twentieth century it is almost impossible. It is not in vain that three hundred years have passed, charged with the most complex happenings - among them, to mention only one, that same Don Quixote."

In spite of these three obstacles, the fragmentary Don Quixote of Menard is more subtle than that of Cervantes. The latter indulges in a

rather coarse opposition between tales of knighthood and the meager, provincial reality of his country; Menard chooses as "reality" the land of Carmen during the century of Lepanto and Lope. What Hispanophile would not have advised Maurice Barres or Dr. Rodriguez Larreta to make such a choicel Menard, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, eludes them. In his work there are neither bands of gypsies, conquistadors, mystics, Philip the Seconds, nor autos-da-fe. He disregards or proscribes local color. This disdain indicates a new approach to the historical novel. This disdain condemns Salamambo without appeal.

It is no less astonishing to consider isolated chapters. Let us examine, for instance, Chapter XXXVIII of Part One "which treats of the curious discourse that Don Quixote delivered on the subject of arms and letters." As is known, Don Quixote (like Quevedo in a later, analogous passage of *La hora de todos*) passes judgment against letters and in favor of arms. Cervantes was an old soldier, which explains such a judgment. But that the Don Quixote of Pierre Menard - a contemporary of *La trahison des clerics* and Bertrand Russell - should relapse into these nebulous sophistries! Madame Bachelier has seen in them an admirable and typical subordination of the author to the psychology of the hero; others (by no means perspicaciously) a transcription of Don Quixote; the Baroness de Bacourt, the influence of Nietzsche. To this third interpretation (which seems to me irrefutable) I do not know if I would dare to add a fourth, which coincides very well with the divine modesty of Pierre Menard: his resigned or ironic habit of propounding ideas which were the strict reverse of those he preferred. (One will remember his diatribe against Paul Valery in the ephemeral journal of the superrealist Jacques Reboul.) The text of Cervantes and that of Menard are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer. (More ambiguous, his detractors will say; but ambiguity is a richness.) It is a revelation to compare the Don Quixote of Menard with that of Cervantes. The latter, for instance, wrote (*Don Quixote*, Part One, Chapter Nine)

. . . la verdad, cuya madre es la historia, emula del tiempo, deposito de las acciones, testigo de lo pasado, ejemplo y aviso de lo presente, advertencia de lo por venir.

[. . . truth, whose mother is history, who is the rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future.]

Written in the seventeenth century, written by the "ingenious layman" Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical eulogy of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:

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[. . . truth, whose mother is history, who is the rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future.]

History, mother of truth; the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an

investigation of reality, but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what took place; it is what we think took place. The final clauses - example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future - are shamelessly pragmatic.

Equally vivid is the contrast in styles. The archaic style of Menard - in the last analysis, a foreigner - suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his precursor, who handles easily the ordinary Spanish of his time.

There is no intellectual exercise which is not ultimately useless. A philosophical doctrine is in the beginning a seemingly true description of the universe; as the years pass it becomes a mere chapter - if not a paragraph or a noun - in the history of philosophy. In literature, this ultimate decay is even more notorious. "Don Quixote," Menard once told me, "was above all an agreeable book; now it is an occasion for patriotic toasts, grammatical arrogance and obscene deluxe editions. Glory is an incomprehension, and perhaps the worst."

These nihilist arguments contain nothing new; what is unusual is the decision Pierre Menard derived from them. He resolved to outstrip that vanity which awaits all the woes of mankind; he undertook a task that was complex in the extreme and futile from the outset. He dedicated his conscience and nightly studies to the repetition of a pre-existing book in a foreign tongue. The number of rough drafts kept on increasing; he tenaciously made corrections and tore up thousands of manuscript pages.<3> He did not permit them to be examined, and he took great care that they would not survive him. It is in vain that I have tried to reconstruct them.

I have thought that it is legitimate to consider the "final" Don Quixote as a kind of palimpsest, in which should appear traces - tenuous but not undecipherable - of the "previous" handwriting of our friend. Unfortunately, only a second Pierre Menard, inverting the work of the former, could exhume and resuscitate these Troys . . .

"To think, analyze and invent," he also wrote me, "are not anomalous acts, but the normal respiration of the intelligence. To glorify the occasional fulfillment of this function, to treasure ancient thoughts of others, to remember with incredulous amazement that the doctor universalis thought, is to confess our languor or barbarism. Every man should be capable of all ideas, and I believe that in the future he will be."

Menard (perhaps without wishing to) has enriched, by means of a new technique, the hesitant and rudimentary art of reading: the technique is one of deliberate anachronism and erroneous attributions. This technique, with its infinite applications, urges us to run through the Odyssey as if it were written after the Aeneid, and to read *Le jardin du Centaure* by Madame Henri Bachelier as if it were by Madame Henri Bachelier. This technique would fill the dullest books with adventure. Would not the attributing of *The Imitation of Christ* to Louis Ferdinand Celine or James Joyce be a sufficient renovation of its tenuous spiritual counsels?

<1> Madame Henri Bachelier also lists a literal translation of a literal translation done by Quevedo of the *Introduction a la vie devote*

of Saint Francis of Sales. In Pierre Menard's library there are no traces of such a work. She must have misunderstood a remark of his which he had intended as a joke.

<2> I also had another, secondary intent-that of sketching a portrait of Pierre Menard. But how would I dare to compete with the golden pages the Baroness de Bacourt tells me she is preparing, or with the delicate and precise pencil of Carolus Hourcade?

<3> I remember his square-ruled notebooks, the black streaks where he had crossed out words, his peculiar typographical symbols and his insect-like handwriting. In the late afternoon he liked to go for walks on the outskirts of Nimes; he would take a notebook with him and make a gay bonfire.