

## Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*

For Silvina Ocamo

The visible *oeuvre* left by this novelist can be easily and briefly enumerated; unpardonable, therefore, are the omissions and additions perpetrated by Mme. Henri Bachelier in a deceitful catalog that a certain newspaper, whose Protestant leanings are surely no secret, has been so inconsiderate as to inflict upon that newspaper's deplorable readers—few and Calvinist (if not Masonic and circumcised) though they may be. Menard's true friends have greeted that catalog with alarm, and even with a degree of sadness. One might not that only yesterday were we gathered before his marmoreal place of rest, among the dreary cypresses, and already Error is attempting to tarnish his bright Memory. ... Most decidedly, a brief rectification is imperative.

I am aware that it is easy enough to call my own scant authority into question. I hope, nonetheless, that I shall be prohibited from mentioning two high testimonials. The baroness de Bacourt (at whose unforgettable *vendredis* I had the honor to meet the mourned-for poet) has been so kind as to approve the lines that follow. Likewise, the countess de Bagnoregio, one of the rarest and most cultured spirits of the principality of Monaco (now of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, following her recent marriage to the international philanthropist Simon Kautzsch—a man, it grieves me to say, vilified and slandered by the victims of his disinterested operations), has sacrificed “to truth and to death” (as she herself has phrased it) the noble reserve that is the mark of her distinction, and in an open letter, published in the magazine *Luxe*, bestows upon me her blessing. Those commendations are sufficient, I should think.

I have said that the *visible* product of Menard's pen is easily enumerated. Having examined his personal files with the greatest care, I have established that his body of work consists of the following pieces:

- a) a symbolist sonnet that appeared twice (with variants) in the review *La Conque* (in the numbers for March and October, 1899):
- b) a monograph on the possibility of constructing a poetic vocabulary from concepts that inform common speech, “but are, rather, ideal objects created by convention essentially for the needs of poetry” (Nimes, 1901);
- c) a monograph on “certain connections or affinities” between the philosophies of Descartes, Leibniz, and John Wilkins (Nimes, 1903);
- d) a monograph on Leibniz' *Characteristica universalis* (Nimes, 1904);
- e) a technical article on the possibility of enriching the game of chess by eliminating one of the rook's pawns (Menard proposes, recommends, debates, and finally rejects this innovation);
- f) a monograph on Ramon Lull's *Arts magna generalis* (Nimes, 1906);
- g) a translation, with introduction and notes, of Ruy Lopez de Sugura's *Libro de la invencion liberal y arte de juego del axedrez* (PARIS, 1907);
- h) drafts of a monograph on George Boole's symbolic logic;

- i) a study of the essential metrical rules of French prose, illustrated with examples taken from Saint-Simon (*Revue des langues romanes*, Montpellier, October 1909);
- j) a reply to Luc Durtain (who had countered that no such rules existed), illustrated with examples taken from Luc Durtain (*Revue des langues romanes*, Montpellier, December 1909);
- k) a manuscript translation of Quevedo's *Aguja de navegar culto*, titled *Las boussole dos precieux*;
- l) a forward to the catalog of an exhibit of lithographs by Carolus Hourcade (Nimes, 1914);
- m) a work entitled *Les problemes d'un probleme* (Paris, 1917), which discusses in chronological order the solutions to the famous problem of Achilles and the tortoise (two editions of this work have so far appeared; the second bears an epigraph consisting of Leibniz's advice "*Ne craignez point, monsieur, la tortue,*" and brings up to date the chapters devoted to Russell and Descartes);
- n) a dogged analysis of the "syntactical habits of Toulet (*N.R.F.*, March 1921) (Menard, I recall, affirmed that censure and praise were sentimental operations that bore not the slightest resemblance to criticism);
- o) a transposition into alexandrines of Paul Valery's *Cimentiere marin* (*N.R.F.*, January 1928);
- p) a diatribe against Paul Valery, in Jacques Reboul's *Feuilles pour la suppression de la realite* (which diatribe, I might add parenthetically, states the exact reverse of Menard's true opinion of Valery; Valery understood this, and the two men's friendship was never imperiled);
- q) a "definition" of the countess de Bagnoregio, in the "triumphant volume" (the phrase is that of another contributor, Gabriele d'Annunzio) published each year by that lady to rectify the inevitable biases of the popular press and to present "to the world and all of Italy" a true picture of her person, which was so exposed (by reason of her beauty and bearing) to erroneous and/or hasty interpretations;
- r) a cycle of admirable sonnets dedicated to the baroness de Bacourt (1934);
- s) a handwritten list of lines of poetry that owe their excellence to punctuation.<sup>1</sup>

This is the full extent (save for a few vague sonnets of occasion destined for Mme. Henri Bachelier's hospitable, or greedy, *album des souvenirs*) of the *visible* lifeworld of Pierre Menard, in proper chronological order. I shall turn now to the other, the subterranean, the interminably heroic production—the *oeuvre nonpareil*, the *oeuvre* that must remain—for such our human limitations!—unfinished. This work, perhaps the most significant writing of our time, consists of the ninth and thirty-eight chapters of Part I of *Don Quixote* and a fragment of Chapter XXII. I know

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<sup>1</sup> Mme. Henri Bachelier also lists a literal translation of Quevedo's literal translation of St. Francis de Sale's *Introduction a la vie devote*. In Pierre Menard's library there is no trace of such a work. This must be an instance of one of our friend's droll jokes, misheard or misunderstood.

that such a claim is on the face of it absurd; justifying that “absurdity” shall be the primary object of this note.<sup>2</sup>

Two texts, of distinctly unequal value, inspired the undertaking. One was that philological fragment by Novalis—number 2005 in the Dresden edition, to be precise—which outlines the notion of *total identification* with a given author. The other was one of those parasitic books that set Christ on a boulevard, Hamlet a La Cannabiere, or don Quixote on Wall Street. Like every man of taste, Menard abominated those pointless travesties, which Menard would say, were good for nothing but occasioning a plebeian delight in anachronism or (worse yet) captivating use with the elementary notion that all times and places are the same, or are different. It might be more interesting, he thought, though of contradictory and superficial execution, to attempt what Daudet had so famously suggested: conjoin in a single figure (Tartarin, say) both the Ingenious Gentlemen don Quixote and his squire... .

Those who have insinuated that Menard devoted his life to writing a contemporary *Quixote* besmirch his illustrious memory. Pierre Menard did not want to compose *another* Quixote, which surely is easy enough—he want to compose *the* Quixote. Nor, surely, need one be obliged to note that his goal was never a mechanical transcription of the original; he had no intention of *copying* it. His admirable ambition was to produce a number of pages which coincided—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes.

“My purpose is merely astonishing,” he wrote me on September 30, 1934, from Bayonne. “The final term of a theological or metaphysical proof—the world around us, or God, or chance, or universal Forms—is no more final, no more uncommon, than my revealed model. The sole difference is that philosophers publish pleasant volumes containing the intermediate stages of their work, while I am resolved to suppress those stages of my own.” An indeed there is not a single draft to bear witness to that years-long labor.

Initially, Menard’s method was to be relatively simple: Learn Spanish, return to Catholicism, fight against the Moor or Turk, forget the history of Europe from 1602 to 1918—*be* Miguel de Cervantes. Pierre Menard weighed that course (I know he pretty thoroughly mastered seventeenth-century Castilian) but he discarded it as too easy. To impossible, rather!, the reader will say. Quite so, but the undertaking was impossible from the outset, and of all the impossible ways of bringing it about, this was the least interesting. To be a popular novelist of the seventeenth century in the twentieth seemed to Menard to be a diminution. Being, somehow, Cervantes, and arriving thereby at the Quixote—that looked to Menard less challenging (and therefore less interesting) than continuing to be Pierre Menard and come to the

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<sup>2</sup> I did, I might say, have the secondary purpose of drawing a small sketch of the figure of Pierre Menard—but how dare I complete with the gilded pages I am told the baroness de Bacourt is even now preparing, or with the delicate sharp *crayon* of Carolus Hourcade?

Quixote through the experiences of Pierre Menard. (It was that conviction, by the way, that obliged him to leave out the autobiographical foreword to Part II of the novel. Including the prologue would have meant creating another character—“Cervantes”—and also presenting Quixote through that character’s eyes, not Pierre Menard’s. Of course, spurned that easy solution.) “The task I have undertaken is not *in essence* difficult,” I read at another place in that letter. “If I could just be immortal, I could do it.” Shall I confess that I often imagine that he did complete it, and that I read the Quixote—the *entire* Quixote—as if Menard had conceived it? A few nights ago, I was leafing through Chapter XXVI (never attempted by Menard), I recognized our friend’s style, could almost hear his voice in this marvelous phrase: “the nymphs of the rivers, the moist and grieving echo.” That wonderfully effective linking of one adjective of emotion with another of physical description brought to mind a line from Shakespeare, which I recall we discussed one afternoon:

Where a malignant and turban’d Turk . . .

Why the Quixote? my reader may ask. That choice, made by a Spaniard, would not have been incomprehensible, but it no doubt is so when made by a *Symboliste* from Nîmes, a devotee essentially of Poe—who begat Baudelaire, who begat Mallarmé, who begat Valéry, who begat M. Edmond Teste. The letter mentioned above throws some light on this point. “The *Quixote*,” explains Menard,

deeply interests me, but does not seem to me—*comment dirai-je?*—inevitable. I cannot imagine the universe without Poe’s ejaculation “As, bear in mind this garden was enchanted!” or the *Bateau ivre* or the *Ancient Mariner*, but I know myself able to imagine it without the *Quixote* is not necessary. I can premeditate committing it to writing, as it were—I can write it—without falling into a tautology. At the age of twelve or thirteen I read it—perhaps read cover to cover, I cannot recall. Since then, I have carefully reread certain chapters, those which, at least for the moment, I shall not attempt. I have also glanced at the interludes, the comedies, the *Galatea*, the Exemplary Novels, the undoubtedly laborious *Travaux of Persiles and Sigismunda*, and the poetic *Voyage to Parnassus*.... My general recollection of the *Quixote*, simplified by forgetfulness and indifference, might well be the equivalent of the vague foreshadowing of a yet unwritten book. Given that image (which no one can in good conscience deny me), my problem is, without the shadow of a doubt, much more difficult than Cervantes’. My obliging predecessor did not spurn the collaboration of chance; his method of composition for the immortal book was a bit *a la diable*, and he was often swept along by the inertiae of the language and the imagination. I have assumed the mysterious obligation to reconstruct, word for word, the novel that for him was spontaneous. This game of solitaire I play is governed by two polar rules: the first allows me to try out formal or psychological variants; the second forces me to sacrifice them to the “original” text and to come, by irrefutable argument, to those eradications .... In addition to these first two artificial constraints there is another, inherent to the project. Composing the *Quixote* in

the early seventeenth century was a reasonable, necessary, perhaps even inevitable undertaking: in the early twentieth, it is virtually impossible. Not for nothing have three hundred years elapsed, freighted with the most complex events. Among those events, to mention but one, is the *Quixote* itself.

In spite of these three obstacles, Menard's fragmentary *Quixote* is more subtle than Cervantes'. Cervantes crudely juxtaposes the humble provincial reality of his country against fantasies of the romance, while Menard chooses as his "reality" the land of Carmen during the century that saw the Battle of Lepanto and the plays of Lope de Vega. What burlesque brushstrokes of local color that choice would have inspired in a Maurice Barres or Rodriguez Larreta\*! Yet, Menard, with perfect naturalness, avoids the. In his work, there are no gypsy going-on or conquistadors or mystics or Phillip IIs or *auto da fe*. He ignores, overlooks—or banishes—local color. That disdain posits a new meaning for the "historical novel." That disdain condemns *Salammbô*, with not possibility of appeal.

No less amazement visits one when the chapters are considered in isolation. As an example, let us look at Part 1, Chapter XXXVIII, "which treats of the curious discourse that Don Quixote made on the subject of arms and letters." It is a matter of common knowledge that in that chapter, don Quixote (like Quevedo in the analogous, and later, passage in *Las horas de todos*) comes down against letters and in favor of arms. Cervantes was an old soldier; from him, the verdict is understandable. But that *Pierre Menard's* don Quixote—a contemporary of *La trahison des clercs* and Bertrand Russell—should repeat those cloudy sophistries! Mme. Bachelier sees in them an admirable (typical) subordination of the author to the psychology of the hero; others (lacking all perspicacity) see them as a *transcription* of the Quixote; the baroness de Bacourt, as influenced by Nietzsche. To that third interpretation (which I consider irrefutable), I am not certain I dare to add a fourth, though it agrees very well with the almost divine modesty of Pierre Menard: his resigned or ironic habit of putting forth ideas that were the exact opposite of those he actually held. (We should recall that diatribe against Paul Valéry in the ephemeral Surrealist journal edited by Jacques Reboul.) The Cervantes text and the Menard text are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer. (More *ambiguous*, his detractors will say—but ambiguity is richness.)

It is a revelation to compare the *Don Quixote* of Pierre Menard with that of Miguel de Cervantes. Cervantes, for example, wrote the following (Part I, Chapter IX):

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.

This catalog of attributes, written in the seventeenth century, and written by the "ingenious layman" Miguel de Cervantes, is mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand writes:

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.

History, the *mother* of truth!—the idea is staggering. Menard, a contemporary of William James, defines history not as a *delving into* reality but as the very *fount* of reality. Historical truth, for Menard, is not “what happened”; it is what we *believe* happened. The final phrases—*exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor*—are brazenly pragmatic.

The contrast in styles is equally striking. The archaic style of Menard—who is, in addition, not a native speaker of the language in which he writes—is somewhat affected. Not so the style of his precursor, who employs the Spanish of his time with complete naturalness.

There is no intellectual exercise that is not ultimately pointless. A philosophical doctrine is, at first, a plausible description of the universe; the years go by, and it is a mere chapter—if not a paragraph or proper noun—in the history of philosophy. In literature, that “falling by the wayside,” that loss of “relevance,” is better known. The Quixote, Menard remarked, was first and foremost a pleasant book; it is now an occasion for patriotic toasts, grammatical arrogance, obscene *de luxe* editions. Fame is a form—perhaps the worse form—of incomprehension.

Those nihilistic observations were not new; what was remarkable was the decision that Pierre Menard derived from them. He resolved to anticipate the vanity that awaits all the labors of mankind; he undertook a task of infinite complexity, a task futile from the outset. He dedicated his scruples and his nights “lit by midnight oil” to repeating in a foreign tongue a book that already existed. His drafts were endless; he stubbornly corrected, and he ripped up thousands of handwritten pages. He would allow no one to see them, and took care that they not survive him.<sup>3</sup> In vain have I attempted to reconstruct them.

I have reflected that it is legitimate to see the “final” Quixote as a kind of palimpsest, in which the traces—faint but not undecipherable—of our friend's “previous” text must shine through. Unfortunately, only a second Pierre Menard, reversing the labors of the first, would be able to exhume and revive those Troys....

“Thinking, meditating, imagining,” he also wrote me, “are not anomalous acts—they are the normal respiration of the intelligence. To glorify the occasional exercise of that function, to treasure beyond prices ancient and foreign thoughts, to recall with incredulous awe what some *doctor universalis* thought, is to confess our own languor, or our own *barbarie*. Every man should be capable of all ideas, and I believe that in the future he shall be.”

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<sup>3</sup> I recall his square-ruled notebooks, his black crossings-out, his peculiar typographical symbols, and his insect-like handwritings. In the evening, he liked to go out for walks on the outskirts of Nimes, he would often carry along a notebook to make a cheery bonfire.

Menard has (perhaps unwittingly) enriched the slow and rudimentary art of reading by means of a new technique – the technique of deliberate anachronism and fallacious attribution. That technique, requiring infinite patience and concentration, encourages us to read the *Odyssey* as though it came after the *Aeneid*, to read Mme. Henri Bachelier's *Le jardin du Centaure* as though it were written by Mme. Henri Bachelier. This technique fills the calmest books with adventure. Attributing the *Imitatio Christi* to Louis Ferdinand Celine or James Joyce – is that not sufficient renovation of those faint spiritual admonitions?

Nimes, 1939