

## PIERRE MENARD AS LOGOCENTRIC TRANSLATOR: A REAPPRAISAL OF ROSEMARY ARROJO'S ANALYSIS OF "PIERRE MENARD, AUTOR DEL QUIJOTE"

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**Abstract:** This article reevaluates Brazilian theorist Rosemary Arrojo's reading of "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote", by Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, proposing that her claims might be excessive, and calling into question the extent to which "Pierre Menard" can be read as a piece on translation. The first section briefly sketches deconstruction's view on language and Arrojos' own work; the second summarizes Arrojo's analysis as contained in *Oficina de tradução*; the third exposes its limitations: its allegorical nature, its drawing upon a problematically amalgamating take on *reading*, *interpretation* and *translation*, the story's difficult alignment with certain logocentric tenets and internal limitations of logocentrism's take on language; the final section evaluates the role of George Steiner's commentary on the short story as formative of the opinion that "Pierre Menard" is about translation.

**Keywords:** Jorge Luis Borges; "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote"; Rosemary Arrojo; logocentrism; George Steiner

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## PIERRE MENARD, TRADUTOR LOGOCÊNTRICO: UMA REAVALIAÇÃO DA ANÁLISE DE ROSEMARY ARROJO DE “PIERRE MENARD, AUTOR DEL QUIJOTE”

**Resumo:** Este artigo reavalia a leitura feita pela teórica brasileira Rosemary Arrojo do conto “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote”, do escritor argentino Jorge Luis Borges; propõe que suas conclusões sobre o conto podem ser excessivas, e questiona até que ponto o conto pode ser lido como uma obra sobre tradução. A primeira seção esquematiza brevemente a visão da desconstrução sobre a linguagem, e o trabalho de Arrojo; a segunda resume a análise que faz Arrojo do conto, conforme aparece em seu *Oficina de tradução*; a terceira expõe suas limitações: sua natureza alegórica, seu embasamento em uma problemática amálgama entre *leitura*, *interpretação* e *tradução*, as dificuldades em se alinhar o conto aos pressupostos centrais do logocentrismo e as contradições internas do logocentrismo; a seção final avalia o papel de um comentário de George Steiner para a formação da opinião de que o conto versa sobre tradução.

**Palavras-chave:** Jorge Luis Borges; “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote”; Rosemary Arrojo; logocentrismo; George Steiner

### 1. Translation and deconstruction: a brief overview

Equivalence has remained a central problem for Translation Studies from before its scientific era. We may easily ascertain this by quickly glancing at two theoretical testimonies of scholars who have reviewed the various theories of translation: Antony Pym dedicates the first two chapters of his *Exploring Translations Theories* (2010, pp. 06-42) to equivalence theories; the following chapters will all deal with theories which, one way or another, endeavor to counter the concept, while, as Pym shows, holding various levels of compatibility with it. In a similar manner, Edwin Gentzler, in the penultimate chapter of his *Contemporary Translation Theories* (2nd rev. ed. 2001), claims that all theories reviewed in his previous chapters depend on some version of the concept of *equivalence*; all of them, Gentzler says, are “unified

by a conceptual framework that assumes original presence and a representation of it in the receiving society” (p. 145).

This take on translation—which most likely guides our everyday practices concerning production and reception of translations, and which may even justify our very need of them—draws upon a rapport between language, on the one hand, and its users and external “concrete” reality, on the other, which accepts language’s descriptive power over an independent, non-linguistic world. Speakers—fully conscious subjects, and in full access and control of their mental contents—manipulate linguistic signs, the meaning of which is pre-determined by their relation to external referents (external to both signs and subject), and which help them refer to what they see, mentally manipulate what they do not see, and even make up what does not exist. Natural languages thus gain form and function by allowing a knowing subject to, more than speak of things, *know* them, while thoroughly and consciously working out their expressive potential in order to control their ambiguities and have them reach zones which their current shape cannot encompass.

The above briefly sketches the theoretical framework problematized by deconstruction. Drawing upon the likes of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Benjamin, Foucault, Freud and (not unsurprisingly) Saussure, and destabilizing concepts such as *subject*, *conscience*, *knowledge*, and *language*, as well as the relations between signifier and signified, deconstruction promotes reading practices which excavate texts in search of inconsistencies, and expose the illusion of a fully conscious knowing subject, able to reach the original essence (or *presence*, as deconstructionists would have it) which is the source of the very possibility of knowledge—illusion which they call *logocentrism*.

Reflection on translation may assume a potentially disturbing role against such a framework. Contact between languages exposes that which seems to lie between or beyond the grasp of linguistic expression. Search for identity reveals *différance*—which is simultaneously *distinction* and *deferment* in Derrida’s coinage. According to Gentlzer, Derrida is interested in the

process of translation, because it is during this pre-textual moment that search of equivalence takes place, and differences between languages' expressive grasp become visible (2001, p. 165); this moment enhances hope of overcoming differences, as the desire for stable semantic essence comes to the fore. The presence of this transcendental meaning vanishes, however, as translation goes from moveable process to final product: when a chain of signifiers is decided upon and fixed into place, not only differences in meaning between original and translation are fixed alongside with the signals taken as equivalents in both languages (differences which will persist, despite our best efforts to oust them), but also the very chains remain open to the possibility of further shifts, due to semantic dislocation in the arbitrary and unstable relations between signifier-signified and sign-community. Deconstruction thinks translation not as a preserver of essences, but as a source of perpetual differentiation.

In Translation Studies, Brazilian scholar Rosemary Arrojo remains a most cherished name for fostering deconstruction in her native soil by reflecting on translation. To the logocentric metaphor of translation as *substitution/transportation* (she has them as a single unity, despite their quite dissimilar metaphorical substrata), Arrojo prefers that of translation as *palimpsest*: an act of writing, reading and interpretation superimposed to a previous linguistic utterance, which is partially deleted in result (1886/2007, p. 23). While the first metaphor thinks translation according to its potential for functional or semantic identity and its maintenance—that is, from its capacity to realize the presence of transcendental meaning—the second emphasizes the dislocation of meaning across signifiers, and consequently the differences sanctioned in our reading, interpreting and translating practices.

One of her favorite targets is the concept of *fidelity* (momentarily, we may safely assume it as a near-synonym for *equivalence*), which is responsible not only for defining translation in reference to its original, but especially for setting the former as inferior to the latter. As she correctly points out, translators are not faithful to the

texts they translate, but to their interpretations thereof, as well as their own personal views of reading and translating (1993, p. 25). When commenting the quarrel between Nelson Arscher (reviewer of *John Donne, o poeta do amor e da morte*) and Paulo Vizioli (compiler and translator of that book), Arrojo seeks to demonstrate that neither Vizioli nor Augusto de Campos (whose translation Arscher champions as superior to Vizioli's) possess the original meaning of Donne's poems; each translator works based on their own interpretation of Donne's work, and not on a supposedly original presence to which they had direct access, and which could be transposed correctly or incorrectly to Portuguese.

This Othin a given community, which may be as small as mid-1930s Rutherford, New Jersey [p. 35] or encompass all readers of *Western Literature*? Its symbolism (allusion to sensual pleasure or transgression)? Its intertextual value (reference to the fruit as opened or veiled reference to fruits previously mentioned in the history of Western Literature)? The meaning to be thus translated is that which the translator generates *as reader*, constructed along the process of making sense of the poem.

In the practical chapters of her *Oficina de tradução*, Arrojo explains *her* readings of the poems she had proposed for translation and the translations of which she had evaluated, in order to show awareness of the fact that her starting point is an interpretation, and to dismiss the idea that she has correctly unveiled the true meaning of a fully established and stable text (the efficiency of this gesture will be commented on below, see 3.4).

## 2. Arrojo reads “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote”

In her *Oficina de tradução*, and in all likelihood following a cue by George Steiner (1975/1988), Arrojo will read Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges' short story “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote” (henceforth *PMAQ*) as an allegory of the logocentric

view on translation, and at the same time of its overcoming. Her palimpsest metaphor was taken from Borges' story.

Her analysis of PMAQ can be divided in three parts: (1) an analysis of Menard's *visible work*, as described in the short story (1986/2007, pp. 14-8); (2) a description of Menard's *invisible work* (1986/2007, pp. 19-22); (3) the proposal of a new *exemplary image* for translation (1986/2007, pp. 22-4). The first two allegorize the logocentric view on language and translation; the third, based on Menard's failure, problematizes this view and proposes an alternative.

## 2.1 Menard's "complete works"

At the beginning of PMAQ, the narrator, a literary critic and personal friend of Menard's, establishes the entirety of his published and unpublished works. Arrojo states that "if we closely analyze Menard's theoretical works, we will see they have a lot in common with traditional translation theories. Menard conceives the text as an object with perfectly defined boundaries; he therefore believes it is possible to reproduce, in another language, the ideas, the style and the nature of the original text in their entirety" (1986/2007, p. 14)<sup>1</sup>.

The thinkers Menard had studied are dear to Borges, and mentioned elsewhere in his writings: René Descartes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, John Wilkins, Ramón Llull, George Boole and Bertrand Russell. Many are related to logic, that is, to the project of developing a universal, immediately intelligible language, in which signifier and signified, on the one hand, and signs and syntax, on the other, relate to one another unambiguously, thus distancing themselves from the obscurities of everyday talk. Such thinkers

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<sup>1</sup> [Se analisarmos mais detidamente seus trabalhos teóricos [os de Menard], veremos que têm muito em comum com as teorias tradicionais da tradução. Menard concebe o texto como um objeto de contornos perfeitamente determináveis, acreditando, portanto, que seja possível [...] reproduzir totalmente, em outra língua, as idéias, o estilo e a natureza de um texto original. (All translations are mine.)

endeavor to bring to completion a project in which language can be a direct expression of knowledge; symbolic language would reproduce in its internal relations the factual relations obtaining in the non-linguistic world, being thus free of intelligibility threats posed by the pragmatics of synchronicity and diachronic variation. They represent, Arrojo says, a logocentric concept of *language*, which underlies a logocentric translation project (1986/2007, p. 17).

She then moves on from logic to literature: “Menard believes literary criticism, just as translation or reading, should not ‘interpret’ or go beyond the original text; instead, they should trace its objective, immutable contours” (1986/2007, p. 18)<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, she demonstrates that Menard’s poetry reveals the impossibility of full transfer of meaning and the stabilization of signs, due to the appearance of some “manuscript translations” (which would be a sign of their unstable character, Arrojo says) and of a sonnet published twice with variants (1986/2007, p. 18).

Among Menard’s poetic writings, item “o”, which Arrojo does not mention, should command our attention: “A transposition into alexandrines of Paul Valéry’s *Cimetière marin* (N.R.F., Jan/1928)” (1996, p. 445)<sup>3</sup>. Sheer transposition from 10-syllable to 12-syllable verse echoes Herbert Ashe’s task in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”: “One afternoon, we [the narrator and Ashe] spoke of the duodecimal number system (in which *twelve* is written *10*). Ashe told me that he was just transposing I don’t know which duodecimal tables into sexagesimal tables (in which *sixty* is written *10*)” (1996, p. 433)<sup>4</sup>. Both men are *transposing*—which word denotes no more than a shift in signifiers. It is, however, no metaphorical approximation

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<sup>2</sup> Menard [...] considera que a crítica, como a tradução ou a leitura, não deve ‘interpretar’ ou ir além do texto original e, sim, delimitar seus contornos objetivos e imutáveis.

<sup>3</sup> Una transposición en alejandrinos del *Cimetière marin*, de Paul Valéry (N.R.F., enero de 1928).

<sup>4</sup> Una tarde, hablamos del sistema duodecimal de numeración (en que el doce se escribe 10). Ashe dijo precisamente que estaba trasladando no sé qué tablas duodecimales a sexagesimales (en las que sessenta se escribe 10).

to state that Ashe is *translating* between systems, which act would envisage perfect and full transference of meanings forever fixed in the original source-system. Readers of Borges may be prone to approximate Ashe's work to Menard's; this would most certainly benefit Arrojo's claims, as it strengthens the idea that Menard would not intend to affect the meaning of Valéry's poem.

## 2.2 Menard's "invisible work"

Menard's "impossible task" does not belong to his catalogue of published works; as is well known, he proposes to write verbatim a previously existing novel. Arrojo describes Menard's intent as follows: "Pierre Menard seeks totality: total interpretation, total control over the text, 'total identification with a given author'" (1986/2007, p. 19)<sup>5</sup>.

Arrojo believes Menard's writing project to be associated with a translation theory: "Menard's 'invisible' project reflects a theory of translation (and of reading) similar to those of Catford and Nida, since his starting point is a theory of language which sanctions the possibility of determining and delimiting the full meaning of a word, even a text, regardless of the context in which it is read or heard" (1986/2007, p. 19)<sup>6</sup>.

His "mysterious task or literally reconstructing Cervantes' spontaneous work", Arrojo claims, "can be interpreted as an *allegory* [emphasis added, more on this word below] of what is traditionally the goal of every translation: Menard imposes on himself the repetition of a foreign text, written in a foreign language, by a different author at a different time, while remaining his own self, that is, without annulling his own context

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<sup>5</sup> Pierre Menard busca a totalidade: interpretação total, controle total sobre o texto, 'total identificação com um autor determinado'.

<sup>6</sup> O projeto "invisível" de Menard reflete, portanto, uma teoria da tradução (e uma teoria da leitura) semelhante à de Catford ou Nida, já que parte de uma teoria da linguagem que autoriza a possibilidade de determinar e delimitar o significado de uma palavra, ou mesmo de um texto, fora do contexto em que é lida ou ouvida. (1986/2007, p. 19.)

and circumstances” (1986/2007, p. 20)<sup>7</sup>. Arrojo calls him a *supertranslator* (1986/2007, p. 20); however, his *supertranslation* results in failure, due to the distinct readings triggered by “original” and “translation”. Ironically, by seeking to repeat Cervantes’ full text, Menard demonstrates the impossibility of full repetition, precisely because the words in Cervantes’ novel cannot stabilize their “original” meaning, regardless of context or interpretation (1986/2007, pp. 21-2).

### 2.3 A new “exemplary image” of translation

Menard’s failure and the narrator’s critical reading—in praising Menard, he actually bore witness to the poet’s lack of success—prompt Arrojo to her final analytical step, when she proposes a new definition of *translation*:

Text and sign are no longer viewed as the “faithful” representation of a stable object existing outside language’s endless labyrinth and begin to be viewed as a machine of potential meaning. Consequently, the exemplary image of the “original” text is no longer that of determinable, fully retrievable cargo; instead of regarding text or sign as vessels to “content” which may be placed therein and kept in control, I propose that their exemplary image is that of a *palimpsest*. Metaphorically, in our translation “workshop”, a “palimpsest” is a text which vanishes, in each cultural community and at different times, in order to give place to a different writing (or interpretation, or reading, or translation) of the “same” text. Translation, as reading, ceases to be an activity protective of “original” authorial meaning to become producer of meaning; protecting meaning would be

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<sup>7</sup> [O] misterioso dever de reconstruir literalmente a obra espontânea de Cervantes pode ser interpretado como uma alegoria do que tradicionalmente se pretende atingir em toda tradução: Menard se impõe a tarefa de repetir um texto estrangeiro, escrito em outra língua, por um outro autor e num outro momento, sem deixar de ser ele próximo, isto é, sem poder anular seu contexto e suas circunstâncias.

impossible, as borghesian Pierre Menard has so aptly (and so contradictorily) demonstrated. (1986/2007, pp. 23-4.)<sup>8</sup>

Besides the evidently borghesian use of *labyrinth*, the very image of the *palimpsest* is borrowed from Borges' PMAQ, even though Arrojo does not repeat the narrator's precise use thereof: "I ponder that it is licit to see in the 'final' *Quijote* a sort of palimpsest, in which there should appear the traces—subtle though not undecipherable—of the 'previous' writing of our friend Menard" (1996, p. 450)<sup>9</sup>. The traces the narrator sees in the *Quijote* are those of Menard's authorial conscience; Arrojo is not concerned with these, but with those they superimpose and erase. Her view and the narrator's are differently focused, though not incompatible.

### 3. Limitations in Arrojo's reading

I have so far described Arrojo's interpretation as an *allegory*; in doing so, I emphasize a word she has herself used to describe her reading. I believe the emphasis is necessary: though it is possible to think of PMAQ as being about the failure of logocentric translation,

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<sup>8</sup> O texto, como o signo, deixa de ser a representação "fiel" de um objeto estável que possa existir fora do labirinto infinito da linguagem e passa a ser uma máquina de significados em potencial. A imagem exemplar do texto "original" deixa de ser, portanto, a de uma seqüência de vagões que contém uma carga determinável e totalmente resgatável. Ao invés de considerarmos o texto, ou o signo, como um receptáculo em que algum "conteúdo" possa ser depositado e mantido sob controle, proponho que sua imagem exemplar passe a ser a de um palimpsesto. [...] § Metaforicamente, em nossa "oficina", o "palimpsesto" passa a ser um texto que se apaga, em cada comunidade cultural e em casa época, para dar lugar a outra escritura (ou interpretação, ou leitura, ou tradução) do "mesmo" texto. [...] § A tradução, como a leitura, deixa de ser, portanto, uma atividade que protege os significados "originais" de um autor, e assume sua condição de produtora de significados; mesmo porque protegê-los seria impossível, como tão bem (e tão contrariadamente) nos demonstrou o borgiano Pierre Menard.

<sup>9</sup> He reflexionado que es lícito ver en el *Quijote* "final" una espécie de palimpsesto, en el que deben traslucirse los rastros—tenuos pero no indescifrables—de la "previa" escritura de nuestro amigo [Menard].

we must remain aware that this critical gesture is contingent (at best) or arbitrary (at worst).

### 3.1 Allegorical reading

Arrojo seems quite certain that PMAQ *is* about translation. Despite her use of the word *allegory*, she (and others who read Borges's story in a similar key, as will be pointed later) does not always demonstrate awareness of how impactful this actually is. PMAQ approaches the issue of translation (it does mention them, for example) and even flirts with the comparison between Menard's task and that of a translator, but that is not the same as making translation the full-blown central theme of the story, so as to provide sufficient support for a strong version of Arrojo's reading.

It is Menard himself (as cited by the narrator) the one to mention Cervantes' novel as an original: "it is undeniable that my problem is far more difficult than Cervantes'. My complacent precursor has not refused collaborating with chance; his immortal piece was composed *à la diable*, so to say, driven by the inertia of language and invention. I have undertaken the mysterious duty of literally reconstructing his spontaneous work. My solitary task is ruled by two polar laws: the first allows me to experiment with formal or psychological variants; the second compels me to sacrifice them to the 'original' text, and to build undisputable reasoning to justify such annihilation" (1996, p. 448)<sup>10</sup>. Arrojo overlooks this passage in her analysis. The key to her disregard might lie in the inverted comas: they hint that Menard's *Quijote* is similar to a translation of Cervantes', but it is *not* one. Undoubtedly, Cervantes' novel

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<sup>10</sup> es indiscutible que mi problema es harto más difícil que el de Cervantes. Mi complaciente precursor no rehusó la colaboración del azar: iba componiendo la obra inmortal un poco *à la diable*, llevado por inercias del lenguaje y de la invención. Yo he contraído el misterioso deber de reconstruir literalmente su obra espontánea. Mi solitario juego está gobernado por dos leyes polares. La primera me permite ensayar variantes de tipo formal o psicológico; la segunda me obliga a sacrificarlas al texto 'original' y a razonar de un modo irrefutable esa aniquilación...

and Menard's "text" bear some type of identity relation, which supports the comparison with an original-translation textual pair. However, the privileged type of intertextual relation obtaining between original and translation is not the only one possible between any textual pair; also, other elements in the story seem to cancel a strong version of this comparison:

(1) First, Menard learns Spanish and writes his *Quichotte* in Spanish: no language shift, between languages or within a single language, is outlined.

(2) Menard's explicit refusal to copy or transcribe Cervantes' novel (1996, p. 446) should imply having *no contact* with it. He claims to have read it "when I was twelve or thirteen, perhaps throughout. After that, I have closely reread a few chapters, those I shall not attempt for now. My overall memory of the *Quijote*, simplified by oblivion and indifference, may very well resemble the imprecise previous image of a book not written" (1996, p. 448)<sup>11</sup>. His contact with the *Quijote* is markedly different from the careful and extensive attention translators (literary or not) must pay to their original. The textual pair of Cervantes' and Menard's *Quijote* bear an *outline-final text* relation, which is significantly distinct from the original-translation one.

Arrojo will ponder on the question of *why* Menard chose the *Quijote* for his literary enterprise (1993, pp. 91-114; 2004); we need not go over her reflections on that head, but I would like to provide a fitting explanation: Menard would have possibly kept better memory of a work he held in higher esteem; his arguably more accurate memory, if precise enough, would, indeed, amount to copying or transcribing. This explanation finds further support in his decision not to begin his *Quijote* by

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<sup>11</sup> a los doce o trece años, tal vez integralmente. Después he releído con atención algunos capítulos, aquellos que no intentaré por ahora. [...] Mi recuerdo general de Quijote, simplificado por el olvido y la indiferencia, puede muy bien equivaler a la imprecisa imagen anterior de un libro no escrito.

those chapters he read more attentively, and of which he would probably hold better memory.

(3) Finally, other inverted comas—those in *final* and *previous*, below—bear witness to the partiality of the resemblance: “I ponder that it is licit to see in the ‘final’ *Quijote* a sort of palimpsest, in which there should appear the traces—subtle though not undecipherable—of the ‘previous’ writing of our friend Menard” (1996, p. 450)<sup>12</sup>. This passage alludes to reading Cervantes’ novel as if it had been entirely rewritten by Menard: the novel, in Menard’s project, holds the position of *target-text*; Menard’s goal is not the depart from it, but to arrive at it; if boyhood memories work as *outline*, the existing finished novel functions as a sort of *answer key* against which to verify the correctness of Menard’s solutions. The *answer-key* comparison is furthered by Menard’s taste for logic, and by the way he reasons to bring his enterprise to term (see below, 3.3). Menard’s writing process, given the above, is not strictly identical with that of a translation; his search for equivalence is not the same as a translator’s, who begins from a very well-established point of departure (please note *well-established* need not mean *completely established*) to reach an initially undetermined point of rest, which progressively takes shape and is, even when considered finished, open to criticism and revision.

Arrojo’s analysis is weakened by its contingent, ill-justified nature: Menard’s *invisible work* is not, strictly speaking, a commentary on (logocentric) translation because Menard has no intention of translating. Some textual cues may, it is true, allow for allegoric interpretation bent on emphasizing what Menard’s task and a translator’s have in common—search for some type of equivalence—; Arrojo’s gesture has therefore some foundation, but it cannot be said to follow necessarily from strong structural cuing in PMAQ.

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<sup>12</sup> He reflexionado que es lícito ver en el *Quijote* “final” una especie de palimpsesto, en el que deben traslucirse los rastros—tenues pero no indescifrables—de la “previa” escritura de nuestro amigo [Menard].

### 3.2 Conceptual definitions: reading and interpretation

What cues Arrojo's statement of a strong closeness between PMAQ and translation is not so much Menard's relation to translation as his relation to *reading*. Deconstruction emphasizes difference and creativity in translation; this causes Arrojo to very strongly approximate *reading*, *interpreting* and *translating*, to the point that they become nearly indiscernible. (She will comment specifically on the logocentric take on the differences between *comprehension* and *interpretation* and its implication on logocentric translation in her article "Compreender x interpretar e a questão da tradução" [see Arrojo, 2003]).

Arrojo is not alone in approximating *translation* and *interpretation*: Eco (2007, pp. 270-6) shows that the identity between the two concepts has a history in Hermeneutics; proponents of such identity include Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricœur and Steiner. He takes pains to prove that both Pierce and Jakobson (taking the cue of his tripartite typology of translation from Pierce) did not really *mean* the two concepts should be identified; he claims Pierce uses translation as a *synecdoche* (not as a *synonym*) for *interpretation* (2007, pp. 265-70), and Jakobson's use of Pierce's idea follows suit.

Eco agrees that every translation is *a mode of* interpretation, but believes it is undesirable to equate the two. I would agree with Eco; consequently, I believe that deconstruction, though criticizing logocentrism for devaluing translations as inferior to their originals, promotes a similar devaluing by inflating it to signify nearly every single instance of meaning production.

I would like to advance two testimonies of this inadvertent impoverishment. Nicholas Round, when describing metaphors for translation, begins his article by commenting on the reserve practice, that of using translation as a metaphor for other cognitive phenomena. He questions the relevance of such overall identification:

The proposition that “There is something called translation, which, besides being what translators do is (more or less) what all other attempts at organizing or applying knowledge amount to” can tell us very little about translation. It reduces any notion of that undertaking to the minimal element which all those others have in common with it. About them it tells us only that one thing; so it cannot tell us much about them either. [...] A temptation always exists to elevate the theoretical parts of one's own discipline into a “theory of everything”. (2005, p. 48.)

In a similar vein, Alex Bühler also criticizes such generalizations for being so extensive they destroy the very possibility of adequately using a given term or studying the phenomenon it names. He is especially concerned with the words *translation* and *interpretation* and their respective concepts:

interpreting is any activity aiming at bringing about comprehension, and translating has the same aim, but normally involves a different language in which comprehension is to take place. Thus “Every translation is an interpretation” merely says that an activity aiming at comprehension is an activity aiming at comprehension. The unelaborated thesis of translation as interpretation does not convey more than its triteness. (In RICCARDI [ed.], 2002, p. 56.)

Bühler undertakes an investigation bent on unveiling the precise relation between *interpretation* and *translation*, demonstrating the need to acknowledge that, even though instances of translation must be rightfully considered instances of interpretation, the opposite is not always acceptable.

At the end of PMAQ, the narrator informs us that Menard's invisible work “has enriched the careful and rudimentary art of reading by means of a new technique: that of deliberate anachronism

and erroneous attribution” (1996, p. 450)<sup>13</sup>. The story thus aligns with a significant portion of Borges’ work, devoted to fictionally and critically problematizing the act of reading—which Arrojo herself has aptly noted in some of her writings on this short story. But it does not follow from that that we may simply identify what PMAQ terms *reading* with what Arrojo terms *translation*.

### 3.3 Central aspects of logocentrism

As *reading* and *interpretation* seem synonymous for Arrojo, her allegory is enriched with a new difficulty: there are no clear cues in PMAQ that Menard is keen on having “total control over the text”, in the sense of efficiently and permanently controlling its *meaning*. As the true source of awe in Menard’s project lies in the chain of signifiers, PMAQ is reasonably vague when it comes to meaning.

Menard’s *visible work* seems to approximate language use and criticism to formal logic; he describes his task in terms not dissimilar to a logical experiment: “My solitary task is ruled by *two polar laws*: the first allows me to experiment with *formal or psychological variants*; the second compels me to sacrifice them to the ‘original’ text, and to build undisputable *reasoning* to justify such annihilation” (1996, p. 448, emphases added)<sup>14</sup>. He conceives his writing process as the orchestration of signs in a *necessary* order (verifiable in the finished *Quijote*, functioning as an answer-key) from minimal cues worked out by deductive reasoning; this would arguably undermine the role of meaning in his process: symbolic logic is concerned with syntactic relations between propositions, regardless of their content.

Differences in meaning between the finished and the “invisible” *Quijote* are pointed not by Menard, but by his critic. The famous

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<sup>13</sup> ha enriquecido mediante una técnica nueva el arte detenido y rudimentario de la lectura: la técnica del anacronismo deliberado y de las atribuciones erróneas.

<sup>14</sup> Mi solitario juego está gobernado por dos leyes polares. La primera me permite ensayar variantes de tipo formal o psicológico; la segunda me obliga a sacrificarlas al texto ‘original’ y a razonar de un modo irrefutable esa aniquilación...

comparison between two identical passages of the *Quijote* is a critical gesture, and there is more to it than one may see when one takes it too seriously (see below, 3.5). This gesture does not bear witness to Menard's failure, as Arrojo believes; on the contrary, it shows that he was successful in what he intended: faithful reconstruction of a chain of signifiers. It is my opinion that Arrojo has misunderstood Menard's failure, which is not the result of the critic's interpretation, but of two rather trivial facts: the first is that he did not finish rewriting the *Quijote*. (Actually, he may not have begun it: the narrator states Menard has destroyed his "endless drafts". Are we being invited to disbelieve their existence? See below, 3.5.) The second is that, had he done so, his novel would have generated a chain of signifiers *absolutely undistinguishable* from that of a previously existing novel, and would therefore be utterly unable to bear witness to its own existence as a separate work. (This impossibility would reinforce the role played by Menard's literary milieu: if his work is indiscernible from a canonic piece, it can only be made visible with the help of those working within his literary system. *Theirs* is the task of stating there *is* something which is invisible—hence the particular interest of the narrator. See below, 3.5.) The narrator's criticism—his differing interpretations, his comparison between passages and his simulated reading of passages Menard had not accomplished—are, in fact, part of a strategy to show Menard was at least partially successful, and to retrieve his work from utter invisibility.

I could provide here a counterargument in favor of Arrojo. Menard says: "El *Quijote* was above all a pleasant book; now it provides occasion for patriotic toasts, grammatical snobbery and obscenely rich editions. Glory is incomprehension, perhaps the worst type" (1996, p. 450)<sup>15</sup>. Arrojo could have benefited from the word *incomprehension*, and stated that, for Menard, if others do not understand, it is because, for him, the *Quijote* does have

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<sup>15</sup> El Quijote—dijo Menard—fue ante todo un libro agradable; ahora es una ocasión de brindis patrióticos, de soberbia gramatical, de obscenas ediciones de lujo. La gloria es una incomprensión y quizá la peor.

a stable meaning (i.e. to be a pleasant book) which others do not apprehend, but he does. Still, Menard seems here to realize that (much to his dismay, perhaps) the *Quijote* has, indeed, changed over the centuries; it would be therefore difficult to state that he believed in its immutability. He recognizes the possibility of interpretive shifts, and may not deem it incompatible with his project.

It may also be argued against the thesis of a desire for “total control of meaning” that, even though Menard’s project bears resemblance to a combinational view on language in the fashion of Ramón Llull, there is no need to infer that his project wished or saw as necessary to eliminate lack of control over language and meaning, nor does it mean he was not aware of it. All theorists to whom Menard alludes must have been fully aware of the ambiguities of language use. There is oversimplifying exaggeration in supposing that Menard would ignore these problems precisely as he tried to overcome them. The theories of language, reading and translation Arrojo dismissingly calls *logocentric* are not incompatible with a certain degree of instability, and consequently neither would a project based on them.

### 3.4 Internal contradictions of logocentrism

Lack of central aspects of logocentrism in Menard’s project is allied with limitations in Arrojo’s description of what *logocentric translation* would be. In an article dedicated to Arrojo, Brazilian critic and translator Paulo Henriques Britto seeks to demonstrate that deconstruction “saws the very branch upon which it sits” (2001, p. 46)<sup>16</sup>; for him, her analysis shows a fundamental inconsistency in deconstruction, which underlies what may be its most serious flaw: as deconstruction aims to be a critique of Western knowledge and its presuppositions, it is not a truly productive theory; when it stops problematizing and endeavors to take a more positive role—e.g. the very act of *writing* a text—, it must tacitly assume some of the presuppositions about language and translation it explicitly condemns.

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<sup>16</sup> cerra o próprio galho em que está sentada.

In its section concerned with translation criticism and practice, Arrojo's *translation workshop* draws back on schemes very similar to those employed in any equivalence-based translator-training program. Though she was careful to single her reading/interpretation of her model-poems as *hers* (i.e. not universally true, not complete and final), due to lack of any description, real or hypothetical, of how translators *themselves* conceived of poetry, translation and of the poems they translated, her interpretation is still held up against poem and original in the position of *tertium comparationis*, from which translational accuracy or correction may be judged, and alternatives sought. Her workshop cannot but encompass some version of *equivalence*, as Gentzer had affirmed of other translation theories. As Britto points out, the very acts of translating and citing translations (and she goes as far as citing *indirect* translations, Britto notes) imply "logocentric" ideas about reading, writing, and translation, without which writing would be impossible (2001, pp. 42-4).

Deconstruction thus ignores the practical potential and the intuitive strength of the concepts it rejects, and fails to notice that it seems to fundamentally depend on them to be spelled out as a theory. In the case of Arrojo's workshop, her allegorical reading of PMAQ shows this: equivalence is not only the basis for allegorical constructions; it also demands it to the highest level. Components of any allegorical piece must bear as precise a relation to those of the allegorized extract from reality as possible; the closer the relation, the stronger the allegorical impact. It is not surprising, then, that criticism of Arrojo's interpretation was developed by taking perceived flaws in correspondence into account.

### **3.5 Pierre Menard's literary milieu and its impact on his "invisible work"**

I hinted earlier that Menard's dealings with the *Quijote* might have been taken too seriously. Let us expand on this idea.

For starters, a careful reading of the story should be suspicious of the narrator's good intentions. Critics seem to have overlooked the fact that it is not Menard himself who describes his work. PMAQ is also a story about an apparently mediocre literary environment, the members of which exhume the memory of a late minor poet, in order to establish themselves against one another. The most recurring reminder of this is the tense relation between the narrator and another critic of Menard's work, Madame Henri Bachelier; he seems many times intent on countering or belittling her: *his* list of Menard's "complete works" corrects *hers*, by excluding an item she had (with no good reason, according to him) included; he also excludes from his own list Menard's works somehow related to her; close to the end of the story, he accuses her of plagiarism. Also, just as Menard might have depended on the favor of the decadent nobility he praised in portraits and poems, the narrator uses the "authority" of such figures (to whom he pays compliments) to strengthen his own: his authority therefore circularly depends on that of people he himself authorizes. If we take this background into consideration, his critical reading of Menard's *Quijote* as differing (and even surpassing) Cervantes' cannot be rigorously taken as a true perception of differences; his is not a disinterested reading.

Humor also seems to play an unrecognized role in the composition of the story. Failure to critically take humor into account may result in describing Menard's *invisible work* more earnestly than we might be warranted to. I find it honestly surprising that a critic as refined as George Steiner, for instance, would seem to take at face value the assertion that Menard gave up "being" Cervantes because it was "too easy".

Oddities notwithstanding, towards the end something akin to a bitter nihilism sets in: Menard "had resolved to be ahead of the vanity which awaits man's pains; he undertook a most complex enterprise, which was futile from the get-go" (1996, p. 450)<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> [r]esolvió adelantarse a la vanidad que aguarda todas las fatigas del hombre; acometió una empresa complejísima y de antemano fútil.

This seems to shed new light on Menard's supposed work: he was aware of the ridicule of the task; it may reflect his bitterness against the futility of his literary environment. His "invisible work" might not be a truly serious enterprise, but a mock-project, resulting of frustrated expectations of literary grandeur in a world devoted to favor and competing adulation.

These aspects of the story—usually ignored by the translation-centered criticism which fashioned it as a philosophical treatise on hermeneutics, and ignored its eminently *fictional* character—should blur our understanding of just how seriously one should take Menard's strange enterprise.

#### 4. Conclusion

I have tried to demonstrate so far that Arrojo's reading of PMAQ has limitations related to its level of textual justification, its adaptation to a logocentric critique of language and to internal contradictions of deconstruction itself. I should like to conclude by demonstrating that the view on PMAQ as being about translation is not universal.

It was said earlier that Arrojo took her cue from George Steiner; her aforementioned compliment to the short story—it "offers, in few pages, one of the fullest, most brilliant commentaries ever written on the mechanisms of language and its implications for a theory of translation and of literature" (1986/2007, pp. 13-4)<sup>18</sup>—echoes a similar compliment paid by Steiner, with which he begins his commentary on PMAQ: "Arguably, 'Pierre Menard, Author of the Quijote' (1939) is the most acute, most concentrated commentary anyone has offered on the business of translation. What studies of translation there are, including this book, could, in Borges's style, be termed a commentary on his commentary" (1975/1998, p.

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<sup>18</sup> [Pmaq] oferece, em suas poucas páginas, um dos comentários mais brilhantes e mais completos que já se escreveu sobre os mecanismos da linguagem e suas implicações para uma teoria da tradução e para uma teoria da literatura.

73). Arrojo's perception of a desire for "total interpretation, total control over the text" on the part of Menard also echoes Steiner, when he mentions "Pierre Menard's [...] task of total translation" (1975/1998 p. 74). Finally, her three-part analysis is dictated not only by the story's structure, but also by Steiner's commentary, which begins by Menard's bibliography (1975/1998, p. 73), moving on to his "invisible work" (1975/1998, pp. 74-5). Arrojo, therefore, seems to remain very close to Steiner in her opinion concerning the importance of PMAQ for translation theory.

In all likelihood, it was Steiner who first proposed this seemingly lasting opinion, which still finds echoes beyond Arrojo's most recent work (2004, in which Steiner's above cited compliment is explicitly cited [p. 32]): see, for example, Kristal (2002), which not only alludes to PMAQ in its title, but cites Steiner's above cited compliment (p. xiii); see also Waisman (2005), which, once again, praises PMAQ by echoing Steiner's praise (p. 13), and begins with the self-same epigraph from "Las versiones homéricas" used by Steiner in *After Babel*<sup>19</sup>.

Steiner's statement that PMAQ is a commentary on the task of the translator does not seem to have had universal acceptance, however. I find at least one important counter-example: in 1996, Anne-Marie Louis published an article on Borges and translation, in which she explicitly cites Steiner and his compliment to PMAQ. Her criticism of Steiner, however, is very clear: "*After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* by George Steiner takes up the first sentence from 'Las versiones homéricas' among its epigraphs. Meanwhile, *After Babel* makes *\*no reference to Borges' writings on translation*, not even an allusion to the one which supplied it with an epigraph" (1996, pp. 289-90, \*emphasis added)<sup>20</sup>. Louis

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<sup>19</sup> I thank Marc Charron for bringing Waisman's book to my attention.

<sup>20</sup> *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* de George Steiner [...] reprend la première phrase de « Las versiones homéricas » parmi les épigraphes [...]. Cependant, *After Babel* ne contient aucune référence aux écrits de Borges sur la traduction, même pas une allusion au texte d'où est extraite l'épigraphe.

centers her analysis around “Las versiones homéricas” and “Los traductores de las 1001 noches”, disregarding “Las dos maneras de traducir”. (Waisman will dedicate separate chapters of his book to each of these, which he calls Borges’ main pieces on translation [2005 p. 12]. His commentary on PMAQ will take place in a chapter called “Writing as translation”, in which other texts by Borges are also discussed [pp. 97-140, esp. pp. 107-24].) It seems Louis does not consider PMAQ as a text on translation.

My own analysis is, therefore, inscribed in what seems now to be a minor trend in the reception of PMAQ in its relation to translation, which counter Steiner’s rather strong and unproven claim, as well as its impact on subsequent criticism. It is undeniable that, in truly borgesian fashion, PMAQ is *now* a story about translation, after having been so abundantly read, but I find it reasonable that we should call the origins of such interpretation into question; it may now be undesirable to disprove it altogether, but I would argue for a less strong, more cautious version thereof.

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