
**POWER DYNAMICS WITHIN THE CHRONO TROPE OF THE
NARRATIVE OF “PIERRE MENARD AUTHOR OF THE QUIXOTE”
BY JORGE LUIS BORGES**

Dr. Memoona Idris

COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus memoonaidris@cuilahore.edu.pk

Ms. Mariam Azam

Lecturer, Department of Humanities, COMSATS University Islamabad, Sahiwal Campus mariamazam@cuisahiwal.edu.pk

Mr. Samar Kamal Fazli

Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus

samarkamal@cuilahore.edu.pk

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Abstract

Borges is a post-modernist writer who is important with reference to critical analysis on account of his stylistic techniques. This paper seeks to discuss “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote”, a short story by Borges, especially against the cushion of Foucault’s critical theory. It discusses the narrative structure with respect to space and time and the language employed within it. This study would benefit in understanding the post-modernist discourse of Borges’ narrative. This makes it accessible to a wider readership. It will also help in breaking the intellectual hegemony which is otherwise created, by making the text available to only a selected readership due to complexity in its contented style.

Introduction

“Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” is a modernist text which chooses its readers. It offers a “labyrinth” through the artistic use of language, the imbedded thematic structure, and the stylistic interplay. This renders it possible for only selective readership to access and comprehend it. The effect is achieved mostly through the author’s intelligent modelling of the time and space coordinates within the fictional domain. This allows the author to mould the linearity of the narrative and shape it as a labyrinth.

The use of this technique permits a space for incorporation of the questions of power, knowledge, language, and hence the author, reader and narrator triad. In that, this short story can be best analysed against the backdrop of Foucault’s critical theory. This paper seeks to

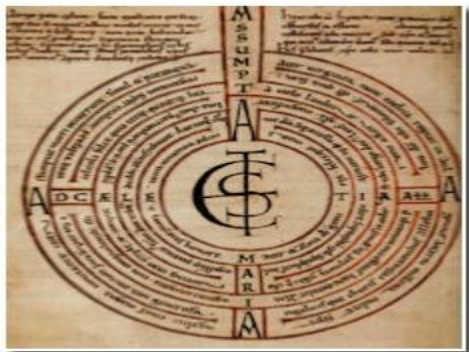


Figure 1 Source: www.labyrinthos.net

The narrative of the story “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” is a labyrinth. It is the fourth story in the anthology by Jorge Luis Borges titled “Labyrinths”. The title itself establishes the stories in the anthologies as “labyrinths”, the claim is further strengthened through an analysis of the background and structure of a labyrinth. Crystal inks, a web resource on the subject has much to say on it. Labyrinths can be traced back to Greeks. A traditional labyrinth is a circular structure with a single pathway going in and out of it. Its origins can be traced back to the myth of Daedalus and Icarus. It also features in Homer’s Iliad. The principal feature of a labyrinth is the complexity offered by its structure. This complexity serves to sift out the participants who

analyse the short story “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” in terms of the structure of its narrative and the themes of power addressed in the story, specifically within the context of the reader, author and the narrator triad constructed within it. It seeks to argue that the specific way of modelling the narrative and the choice of themes make the narrative able to “choose” its reader and directs his/her “gaze”. In that the “text” becomes an entity in itself independent of the author which invites the study of the author instead of it being the other way round. Traditionally the debate in critical study has been to whether study a text as a product of the author or in absence of one. The text under study however invites a new direction of thought for it presents *its* author, and the author becomes a product of the text. Borges then becomes an interesting study in terms of its critical analysis and an important one at that. The paper also seeks to discuss this aspect of the relationship between the author and the text.

The discussion would begin by analysing how the narrative is oriented as a “labyrinth”, the space and time constructs within it, the themes of power and authority, the dialectics of the relationship between the author, reader, narrator and the text and how this shapes up and defines the consciousness of the reader.

get initiated into the journey and the ones who succeed in finishing it. Only the truly worthy gets to experience it. “Ambiguity is richness” (Borges 5) says the narrative of the story. “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” offers complexity of structure through ambiguity of style, plot and language.

The story begins with a direct plunge into the narrative without the slightest attempt at creating a context to facilitate the reader. A second reading however, reveals the intention of the author, which is, to use the mere title of the story as a context. The structure begins with “Invocation” to “The Countess de Bagnoregio” and an “international philanthropist Simon Kautzch” (49) to come to the aid of the author,

for him to be able to prove his point. This is immediately followed by a catalogue. The sequence makes the story compatible with the structure of an epic. The content however, establishes it as a mock epic. The latest entries of the catalogue refer to the absurdity of the references through an implication of a history of personal benefits acquired through Menard. Along with this, the mundaneness of the entries in the catalogue also inverts the structure into farce. The incorporation of dates, actual figures from history like Christ, Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe and Cervantes along with the reference to works of art like Don Quixote, Ancient Mariner and such seems to be an attempt at establishing this fictional piece of writing as sombre. The end notes also make it appear as an essay or an article of serious intentions. The uncertainty in form creates ambiguity for the readers and inhibits a sense of familiarity and comfort from developing in their countenance. This in turn keeps the mind open to the possibility of multiple interpretations. This is how a labyrinth is created through structure and content. The reader is chosen as a result of it and guided through the process of reading and interpreting the text.

Metaphorically, a labyrinth offers an experience of enlightenment, which is available to selective individuals, who are successful in attaining the centre and then completing their journey by returning to the world outside. Labyrinth relates to “wholeness”, which has a “purposeful path”. Going into a labyrinth amounts to the process of “initiation” which “awakens the knowledge...” (Crystalinks n.p). Borges opens the anthology “Labyrinths” with a short story titled “Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” which in the very beginning gives an overview of the style of writing which is preferred by the narrator of that particular story. The description complies with the style followed through by the stories placed later in the anthology, it says, “... in first person, whose narrator would omit or disfigure the facts and indulge in various contradictions which would permit a few readers --- very few readers -- to perceive an atrocious or banal reality” (20). The picture sketched here aptly describes “Pierre

Menard, Author of the Quixote”. The story extensively employs the use of the first person pronoun “I”. This “I” creates a whorl which encompasses the reader, writer, narrator and the text. This in turn creates a labyrinth. This particular aspect has been discussed in depth later in the paper. The amalgamation of facts with fiction serves to merge the boundaries between the two. As a result of this, only a reader who is well read or as experienced as the author, in the particular areas of interest for the author, or somebody who would go at length to research the authenticity of all that is presented, would be able to grasp in totality the true meaning of the story. The others, who are not as well read would be lost to the experience. The story is then not for casual readers. The purpose behind its authorship is focused. The technique of brewing together of facts that are real and those that are fabricated has been practiced in all the three stories that precede “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” in the anthology, and quite a few that follow. Many contradictions are sprinkled over the narrative, both in terms of structure and content. These would be examined in detail with respect to the discussion about the power structures in the story.

“The atrocious or banal reality” (ibid 20) then becomes the higher truth aimed by the narrative to be disclosed to the selected few. Those who fulfil the criteria or are willing to pay the price in terms of the effort it requires, are successful in making the journey in and out of the labyrinth. They are rewarded by a better understanding of the “banal reality” or their everyday existence. But, the truly successful would be the ones who not only succeed in getting to the centre of the labyrinth but are also successful in making it out into the world with the acquired knowledge. This is how the narrative chooses its readers through the use of language and technique. The selection of the subject (theme) presented to the eye for scrutiny then guides the reader to the intended message deciphered only by the selected few.

As a labyrinth, the text becomes a space in itself ... a heterotopia in Foucauldian terms. Foucault discusses the concept of space in relation to time

in detail, in his essay, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”. For Foucault, Utopia is a place which human mind may conceive as perfect, a Utopia however is only imaginary and does not exist in physical terms. In contrast to Utopias are Heterotopias. Heterotopias too are places of desire but the difference lies in the fact that heterotopias exist in physical terms. Foucault defines mirror as a space between the two “a placeless, place” (4). The image of the mirror is recurrent in Borges’ stories as well. “Tlon, Uqbar, Tertius” employs the image and develops it throughout the course of the story. It becomes from something that has a “monstrous quality” (20) to something “abominable” (21) to “stone mirrors” (21). The image is also employed in the story titled “The Circular Ruins” included in the same anthology. The story “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” becomes a mirror in itself.

The story becomes a place where the reader is, yet he/she is not. The effect is created by acknowledging the presence of the reader on multiple instances and then distancing them on others. Sometimes by obliterating their presence by omitting them through discourse, like during midway through the story when the discourse becomes solely about the narrator and Menard which is exercised by the excessive use of the first-person pronoun “I” and sometimes by confronting them by using expressions like “deplorable readers” (49).

For Foucault a mirror is “A virtual space that opens up behind the surface” (Of Other Spaces 4). It enables one to be where one is not and through that standpoint observe oneself. The experience results in self-awareness, “I begin again to direct my eye toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am” (4 *ibid*). The discourse of the story “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” presents for us a truth which is sometimes openly accessible and sometimes behind a flimsy curtain but which without doubt invites one for interpretation. While discussing the merits of Menard’s Don Quixote, the text makes certain observations. These are mostly about the timeframe and hence

the context of its creation and sometimes about his personal background which is related as a positive contribution towards it. However, when excerpts of the two texts are presented as an example, the language turns out to be exactly the same, word for word. This opens a door of thought and invites one to contemplate in one’s own right instead of accepting the given. It allows room for self-inspection also. One is pushed into analysing whether the facts presented as truth are indeed real? And the like.

In his essay “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” Foucault presents six principles of heterotopias. The ones that describe space in terms of time are the ones most relevant for the sake of this paper. For Foucault space is “linked to slices in time” (6). He calls such places “heterochronies” (6). These are either linked to “accumulation of time” (7) like cemeteries or time in its “flowing” and “transitory” phase, for this he gives the example of libraries and museums. The text of “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” has already been established as a space. There is a conscious effort to incorporate time in it. The list of Menard’s writings has been arranged in a “chronological order” (51), there’s a mention of “our time” (51), then there’s a reference of “the history of Europe between the years 1602 and 1918” (52), other than this there’s a mention of Cervantes belonging to the “seventeenth” century and Menard to the “twentieth” (52) and that “three hundred years” (54) lay between the two writers.

Apart from these direct references of time, the context in terms of time is set through placing Menard’s Don Quixote in relation to other literary works. Three dimensions of time are then constructed: the catalogued time, that is, the years mentioned as such, here time seems to have been stacked. The linking of time across literatures includes it in the category of space where time flows. The third dimension is where the reader is placed. This is both detached from the text, for the reader exists outside of it, and included in it, through the acknowledgment of the presence of the reader multiple times within the narrative of the story. There is also the

element of inversion of time and space. This is best reflected through the description of a text, it says, "... those parasitic books which situate Christ on a boulevard, Hamlet on La Cannebierre or Don Quixote on Wall Street" (51). It makes the text "a palimpsest" (56), in the words of the text. The heterotopia in question has limited access granted to only those that pass any kind of test that is presented as a pre-requisite for it ... the reader is thus chosen. The presentation of multiple and counter realities in terms of time and space invites a reader, challenges his/her consciousness and provokes the development of a new consciousness, it then equips one with a certain kind of power within it.

The question of power and the ways it is exercised has been of prime interest for Foucault. For Foucault power is not a mere entity but a "relation". It is not "repressive" but is productive as well. The hub of power is not the state only as is commonly believed, on the contrary it is distributed around. Power is present at all "levels of social relations" and its exercise is "strategic and war-like" (O'Farrell n.p). Foucault has explained power to be of multiple kinds, there is: sovereign power, disciplinary power, pastoral power and power-knowledge (ibid n.p). Sovereign power amounts to the power of the state. Disciplinary power is the one that seeks to discipline the individuals mainly through the surveillance and regulation of time, space and social activities. Social institutions like prisons and asylums etc are institutions through which such power is exercised. Pastoral power amounts to the modern structure of government which seeks to rule its people as a shepherd guides his flock. The most important aspect of Foucault's philosophy on power is perhaps his concept of "knowledge-power". It is the knowledge provided as a result of exercise of various power structures. For Foucault, knowledge is not power, "knowledge reinforces the exercise of power". He has interest in studying how knowledge relates with power and the other way round without establishing that they are the same. (O'Farrell n.p).

Power is a major thematic concern in Borges' story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote". The text defines multiple institutions of power within its discourse. Various institutions of power have been defined as early as the fourth line of the narrative. Religion is featured foremost as an institution that exercises power. The text relates, "...a certain daily, whose *Protestant* tendency is no secret" (49) and on the same page after a few sentences, "deplorable readers ... though these maybe few and Calvinist, if not Masonic and circumcised".

The religion identified is no single. There is a direct mention of Christianity and an implication towards Islam. It could be Judaism also, since both these religions practice circumcision, but in the context of other stories in the anthology, like "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and "The Secret Miracle" that mention Islam explicitly, it is most likely Islam that is mentioned. The religion then appears to be an institution that influences the thought process of its followers and inspires action in them, not necessarily in a productive way. The mention of these religions is in relation to a "certain daily" that has "deplorable readers". The religion then becomes an institution of power that dissipates knowledge, but this knowledge is under surveillance and what the readers get is a censored version of it. This is implied by the fact that the catalogue published by this particular daily omitted Menard. Borges then continues by countering the discourse of the institution of religion by that of his own ... who is here ... the narrator.

The narrator writes "I am aware that it is quite easy to challenge my slight authority" (49). He then identifies two "testimonies" to back his claim. One is that of a "Baroness" and the other "Countess". The titles of the two ladies bring into account another institution of power, that is, the royal court. The court symbolises the state. The list of works by Menard which immediately follows the initial argument reveals that Menard had written in praise about the two ladies who agreed on giving the testimonials. This shows the biasness/surveillance with respect to the knowledge dissipated by them. There are

multiple aspects of a state's power implied through this argument. The case of the two testimonials hints towards the fact that state chaperon's only those writers/ literature that serves its purpose.

The fact that people with religious sentimentalities have not promoted that which has been promoted by the state make the two institutions stand parallel to each other. This theme is very strongly communicated by another story by Borges titled "The Secret Miracle". The protagonist of the story is sentenced to death by the state on which he seeks help from God. As a result, he is granted two minutes of physical time in which he finishes writing his entire manuscript. The two are then presented as counter-productive, gelled together through literature presented as a piece of writing or a text. In "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" the main theme is writing, so this assumption is quite relevant, for it is the theme of writing and producing literature which in turn incorporates the two institutions. Another institution which is discussed by the narrative with respect to power is that of economics.

The relation of the Countess with the philanthropist brings into discussion the business class. He is presented as somebody who is "inconsiderately slaughtered... by the victims of his disinterested manoeuvres" (49). This creates a caricature through the use of irony. There is also a mention of putting "Don Quixote on Wall Street" (51)., this is a reference to the capitalistic economy. It might again be a reference towards the financial gain through the publication of manuscripts and other factors which govern this principal. The publication is monitored by the state and one of the factors which enable the state to exercise this check is the monetary aspect, which is, publishing of the material.

By grouping the institution of language (for what is narrator but sheer language), class and sovereign (state) against religion. Borges first creates (through hyperbole) and then collapses the effect of grandeur of these. This technique recurs throughout the story. These institutions are

all brought together in a single line within the text, which states, "Two texts ... outlines the theme of a *total* identification with a given author ... situate Christ on a boulevard, Hamlet on La Cannebierre or Don Quixote on Wall Street" (51). We can further analyse the institution of language with respect to the authenticity with which Borges implies the word of the narrator, for example, narrator makes a claim which is immediately nullified by the evidence provided in its support. This continues throughout the story. The story then literally becomes a game of words and the position of the narrator, author and the reader becomes significant with respect to each other.

Foucault writes, "We can easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need of an author. Discourses, whatever their status, form, or value, and regardless of our manner of handling them, would unfold in a pervasive anonymity." (What is an Author qtd in Norton Anthology). He sums up his entire argument in a form of questions. He asks: "Who is the real author? "Have we proof of his authenticity and originality?", "What has he revealed in his most profound self in his language?" and "What are the modes of existence of this discourse?" "Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?", "What placements are determined for possible subjects?", "Who can fulfill these diverse functions of the subject?", he concludes by saying "Behind all these questions we would hear little more than the murmur of indifference:", "What matter who's speaking?"

On a superficial reading the short story under consideration seems like an inversion of the concept of the "death of the author" but in fact it is not, rather it is the very endorsement of it. The technique applied by Borges to create the effect may be termed as "inference". Borges' seems to trust his readers' intellect and while his words say one thing, his images/facts say another and it remains to the interpretation of the reader to infer the meaning implied by the author. This is where the author becomes divorced from the narrator, for example, the narrator begins by praising

Menard but the testimonies he brings in to follow his claim are a mere farce, then the list of Menard's works relates the absurdity of the claim. Also, the instance in the story where the narrator claims that the version by Menard is better than Cervantes', and then continues the excerpts from the two only to reveal that they are absolutely identical. The narrator also quotes Menard in saying that "he did not propose to copy it ... a few pages which would coincide --- word for word and line for line..."(52), this creates juxtaposition and a play of words so that the meaning seems to be for a select few who could pass through the labyrinth of language. Also, the Don Quixote as quoted in the story remains the same regardless of the author who wrote it. Through the introduction of multiple subjects in the story, the author vanishes while the reader continues to wander in the labyrinth of words created by him in order to reach the true meaning of the story. The story however slightly diverges from the Foucauldian concept of the effacement of the author due to the richness of the techniques employed, and the language used in the signature style of Borges. As a result, he remains an integral part of the narrative without ever intending to be so. This is how the text points towards its author and invites a reading into his style of writing.

In terms of literary criticism, Foucault's primary concern is language. In that he gives the overview of the subject and object within the narrative of the text. For Foucault, the object is the text and the subject is in two different senses, that is, subject of the sentence and subject as a verb. Norton Anthology quotes Foucault, it says "Individuals get to occupy subject positions (the various roles existing within a discourse or an institution) only through a process in which they are 'subjected to power'" (Foucault qtd in Norton Anthology). The one discussing or using the institution of language to exercise power within the space of the narrative becomes the subject. The one being discussed ends up on the receiving end and becomes the object in that particular moment in discourse. This position is however not fixed or stagnant within the course of the narrative of the story. The three entities presented

through the use of the first person pronoun "I", that is, the author, narrator and Menard occupy the position of the object and subject reciprocally. The fourth presence is that of the reader. The narrative is shaped so that the four change positions continually becoming sometimes the object and at other times the subject of the discourse.

The "I" is sometimes the narrator and sometimes Menard. The two become amalgamated during the part of the narrative that falls on page 53 of the particular text, so that it becomes difficult to distinguish the two. The narrator starts by saying "the reader" on page 49, which then becomes "my reader" on page 52 and then "our reader" on page 53 after which the position of the narrator and Menard also become amalgamated in relation to the reader. The two become one and the reader becomes the authority. Hence the power is transferred first from the author to the narrator, then from narrator to Menard and eventually to the reader through the text, that is, Don Quixote.

The short story by Borges "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" is a very dense piece of fiction which employs multitude of techniques both in terms of language and style. This makes the interpretation of the story a rather extensive task which had to be contained for the purpose of this paper. Apart from the Foucauldian analysis it could very well be subjected to Marxist as well as Hegelian interpretation. It is a rich piece of fiction whose critical analysis may result in the peeling of layer upon layer of meaning which makes it a labyrinth in the true sense of the term.

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