

Making Pierre Menard:

Jorge Luis Borges *contra* Lev Shestov and Benjamin Fondane*

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To the memory of my late Moscow University friends: Viktor Vladlenovich Grushin (1960-2020)
and Víctor Martínez Olivé (1961-1995) who introduced me to Borges back in 1985.

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Abstract

Borges' storytelling genius first burst forth in *Ficciones*, a collection of short stories he wrote during WW2. Yet, surprisingly, many of the characters therein remain a mystery. Drawing on his youthful fascination with Alphonse Daudet's idea of merging Don Quixote and his squire Sancho Panza into one character, *Tartarin*, Borges, in the spring of 1939, created Pierre Menard, an amalgamation, as I hypothesize, of the philosopher Lev Shestov and his disciple Benjamin Fondane. This hypothesis, like Ariadne's thread, leads the author through Borges' famed literary labyrinths that conceal a largely forgotten group of Jewish, Russian, French, Spanish, German, American, and Argentine intellectuals of the 1930s, whose personalities, biographies, and ideas inspired much of the content of *Pierre Menard* and later spilled over to other stories of *Ficciones* and beyond.

El genio de Borges para escribir cuentos se reveló durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial, en las historias que componen el volumen *Ficciones*. Sin embargo, muchos de sus personajes se mantienen en un sorprendente misterio. Siguiendo su juvenil fascinación con la idea de Alphonse Daudet de combinar dos caracteres, tal como Don Quijote y su escudero Sancho Panza, en uno solo (Tartarín), en la primavera de 1939 Borges creó a Pierre Menard, el cual, según mi hipótesis, es una amalgama del filósofo León Chestov y su discípulo Benjamín Fondane. Este descubrimiento, como el hilo de Ariadna, conduce al autor a través de los famosos laberintos de Borges, los que ocultan a un grupo mayormente olvidado de intelectuales judíos, rusos, franceses, estadounidenses y argentinos de la década de 1930, cuyos personalidades, biografías e ideas inspiraron gran parte del contenido de *Pierre Menard* y también influyeron sobre otros cuentos, en *Ficciones* y en libros posteriores.

Keywords: Jorge Luis Borges; Pierre Menard; Don Quixote; Alphonse Daudet; Benjamin Fondane; Lev Shestov / León Chestov; Rachel Bepaloff; Nikolai Berdyaev; Victoria Ocampo; Waldo Frank; Silvina Ocampo; Cesar A. Comet;

Más interesante, aunque de ejecución contradictoria y superficial,
 le parecía el famoso propósito de Daudet:
 conjugar en *una* figura, que es Tartarín, al Ingenioso Hidalgo y a su escudero.

J.L. Borges

Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote

»-En una adivinanza cuyo tema es el ajedrez ¿cuál es la única palabra prohibida?

»Reflexioné un momento y repuse:

»-La palabra ajedrez.

Jorge Luis Borges

El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan

‘In the guessing game to which the answer is *chess*, which word is the only one prohibited?’

I thought for a moment and then replied:

‘The word is *chess*’.

J.L. Borges

The Garden of Forking Paths

I. Argentine Gambit

On Christmas Eve of 1938, Borges suffered a head injury that resulted in septicemia and prolonged treatment. This personal misfortune turned into a landmark in the history of 20th century literature as by its consequences, the event is comparable to Leo Tolstoy's experiences in the Crimean War or Dostoevsky's penal servitude in Siberia. As Borgesian historiography emphasizes, it was from that incident that the famous *fiction* writer emerged. While convalescing in hospital, to convince himself he was on the path to recovery, Borges penned *Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote*. It first appeared in May 1939 in the Buenos Aires literary magazine *Sur* and then again in 1941 as part of the collection *The Garden of Forking Paths* issued by the publishing house *Sur* run by Victoria Ocampo, an Argentinean writer and sponsor of the arts.

At that time, Borges was known in Argentina and Spain as a poet who loved to experiment. To escape the shadows of Pablo Neruda and García Lorca and to find a niche for himself, Borges applied his phenomenal, though somewhat eclectic erudition to the genre of fiction. In 1935, he publishes *A Universal History of Infamy*, a collection of short stories full of peculiar, little known or even bogus, historical characters. But it was Pierre Menard and his comrades from *The Garden of Forking Paths* and *Artifices*, combined in 1944 in *Ficciones*, who brought their author into the European limelight, winning him the Prix International in 1961 and the Cervantes Prize in 1978.

The story became an object of many unapologetic panegyrics.¹ As late as 2006, the original handwritten manuscript of *Pierre Menard* was listed in the Harvard Square

¹ See, e.g., Butler, *Borges' Short Stories*, 2010, 46.

antiquary shop catalogue at the whopping price of \$450,000. As recently as 2021, a special issue of the journal *Romance Studies* dedicated eight academic papers exclusively to *Pierre Menard*. And this is just a drop in the sea of academic studies dedicated to this story. What endeared *Pierre Menard* so much to the literary world?

In the Introduction to the 1993 edition of *Ficciones*, John Sturrock suggested:

It is perhaps the most quoted among Borges' stories, an engaging satire but at the same time a very radical exercise in what we would nowadays want to call literary theory.²

But was *Pierre Menard* properly understood, really? As I shall show, an entire submerged layer of this story has been overlooked by readers and critics alike.

II. French Variation

Pierre Menard is conceived as a *detective* story. Indeed, the protagonist is described as a “devoted admirer of Poe” (“devoto esencialmente de Poe”), and Edgar Allan Poe is the father of the detective story as we know it. But instead of a Poe-like search for a murderer or a hidden treasure, Borges offers his readers a different game – to discover the identity of the protagonist.

Yet the cunning Argentine goes to great lengths to make the work of future detectives as hard as possible. He immediately sends them on a false trail endowing Poe with a strange literary genealogy: “Poe who engendered Baudelaire who engendered Mallarmé who engendered Valéry who engendered Edmond Teste.”³

² Borges, *Ficciones*, 1993, Introduction, p. XX.

³ Devoto esencialmente de Poe, que engendró a Baudelaire, que engendró a Mallarmé, que engendró a Valéry, que engendró a Edmond Teste.

This literary lineage would astound anyone. Unlike his predecessors, illustrious poets, Edmond Teste is just a literary construct, conceived by Paul Valéry in a state of mind closely resembling that of Borges in the hospital:

I was trying, then, to reduce myself to my *actual* characteristics. I had little confidence in my abilities, and I easily found in myself everything that was necessary to despise myself; but I was strong in my infinite desire for clarity, my scorn for convictions and idols, my disgust with ease, and my awareness of my limitations. I had made for myself an inner island, and spent my time exploring and fortifying it.⁴

In the hospital Borges desperately needed an interlocutor and, like Valéry, he invented him. But unlike Valéry, he distanced himself from the narrator, allowing the latter to freely explore ideas contrary to those he might have held himself. To point to this subtle difference, I shall call the narrator Borges-2.

III. Fianchetto

“Why is Monsieur Teste impossible?” – asks Valéry. And is Pierre Menard possible?

At the beginning of the story, dated 1939, we learn that Menard, this French writer of Nîmes, has recently passed away in peace, and now two ladies are vying to be the first to commemorate the deceased with an obituary. While the Baroness de Bacourt is only preparing her “golden pages,” a certain Madame Henri Bachelier has already published a “fallacious catalogue” of Menard’s works in the “Protestant newspaper whose readers are few and Calvinist (if not Masonic or Jewish).”⁵

⁴ Valéry, *La Soirée avec Monsieur Teste*, 1936, Introduction.

⁵ (-si bien estos son pocos y calvinistas, cuando no masones y circuncisos-).

The third admirer, Countess Bagnoregio of the Principality of Monaco, who “has been living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, since her recent marriage to international philanthropist Simon Kautsch,”⁶ published “an open letter of support” (“y en una carta abierta publicada”) in the journal *Luxe*. The Countess is also known for a certain “definition” in a “victorious volume,” which this lady publishes yearly to “present to the world and to Italy an authentic effigy of her person.” The flattering adjective to the ‘volume’ is attributed to Gabriele D’Annunzio, the famous Italian decadent poet.⁷

The list of Menard’s published works contains some twenty items. The first is dated 1899; the last sometime after 1934. Some titles look thoroughly academic, like monographs on Leibnitz (1904) and Ramón Llull⁸ (1906). Yet others look like overt parodies on modern academic dissertations, as for example a “monograph on certain affinities among the ideas of Descartes, Leibnitz, and John Wilkins⁹ (Nîmes, 1903).” Still others sound like unfinished sketches or bizarre polemics, as, for example, “an invective against Paul Valéry in the surrealist *leaflets* (‘hojas’) of Jacques Reboul.” And within this dry academic forest, suddenly, a “cycle of admirable sonnets for the Baroness de Bacourt (1934)”. Altogether a chaotic jumble.

Still, in the opinion of Borges-2, the author of Nîmes deserves special attention due to his unusual undertaking – a bold attempt to rewrite *Don Quixote* word-for-word creating a different work altogether:

⁶ (y ahora de Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, después de su reciente boda con el filántropo internacional Simón Kautzsch).

⁷ Una «definición» de la condesa de Bagnoregio, en el «victorioso volumen» -la locución es de otro colaborador, Gabriele d’Annunzio- que anualmente publica esta dama para rectificar los inevitables falseos del periodismo y presentar «almundo y a Italia» una auténtica efigie de su persona, tan expuesta (en razón misma de su belleza y de su actuación) a interpretaciones erróneas o apresuradas.

⁸ Medieval Christian apologist and missionary (1232-1315) who invented a system of universal logic.

⁹ British clergyman (1614-1672) who created a universal language to replace Latin as *lingua franca*. Borges dedicated a separate essay to him: “Analytical Language of John Wilkins,” that was published in a collection *Otras Inquisiciones* (1937-1952).

He did not want to compose another *Don Quixote* – which would be so easy – but *The Don Quixote*. His aim was never to produce a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy it. His admirable ambition was to produce pages which would coincide – word for word and line for line – with those of Miguel de Cervantes.¹⁰

Menard, ingeniously he thought, expected to change the meaning of the original text with the help of time – by the very fact that his recension appears three centuries later, and so new readers would read it differently.

As Menard's confidant, Borges-2 observed from afar the successes and failure of this undertaking. One or two fragments he quotes – “more ambiguous” and therefore “almost infinitely richer” than those by Cervantes – are just a patch for the wounded ego of his friend. For example, Borges-2 commends Menard's discovery of the phrase from Part 1, Chapter 9:

... Truth, whose mother is history, who is the rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future...¹¹

– which might have had a different meaning in the 17th century, as the very idea of ‘Truth’ had dramatically changed with the passage of three centuries.

Menard confides:

Don Quixote interests me profoundly, but it does not seem to me to have been – how shall I say it – *inevitable*. I cannot imagine the universe without Poe's

¹⁰ No quería componer otro Quijote –lo cual es fácil– sino «el» Quijote. Inútil agregar que no encaró nunca una transcripción mecánica del original; no se proponía copiarlo. Su admirable ambición era producir unas páginas que coincidieran –palabra por palabra y línea por línea– con las de Miguel de Cervantes.

¹¹ la verdad cuya madre es la historia, émula del tiempo, depósito de las acciones, testigo de lo pasado, ejemplo y aviso de lo presente, advertencia de lo por venir.

interjection ‘Ah, bear in mind this garden was enchanted!’ – or without *Le Bateau Ivre* or *The Ancient Mariner*, but I am capable of imagining it without *Don Quixote*.¹²

Unlike a phrase by Poe and poems by Rimbaud and Coleridge, the universe could be easily imagined without *Don Quixote*! Why then did Menard choose *Don Quixote* for his titanic undertaking?

IV. Deflection

And who is Menard? Wandering through the fog of familiar and less familiar literary names dropped by Borges in this story (Luc Durtain, Maurice Barrès, Louis Ferdinand Céline, James Joyce, Bertrand Russell), commentators offered various prototypes for the protagonist.

For Ricardo Piglia, “Menard is certainly a cruel parody of Paul Groussac.”¹³ For John Irwin, Menard is an *echo* of Borges who thought of himself as “a minor Argentinean poet and essayist” at the time.¹⁴ For James Woodall, “Menard himself remains a mystery.”¹⁵ According to Edwin Williamson, “in the character of Pierre Menard we have a Paul Valéry who has woken up one morning to find himself transformed into Franz Kafka.”¹⁶ For Fernando Iwasaki Cauti, Menard is Miguel de Unamuno.¹⁷

¹² «El Quijote -aclara Menard- me interesa profundamente, pero no me parece ¿cómo lo diré? inevitable. No puedo imaginar el universo sin la interjección de Edgar Allan Poe: Ah, bear in mind this garden was enchanted! o sin el Bateau ivre o el Ancient Mariner, pero me sé capaz de imaginarlo sin el Quijote.

¹³ Piglia, *Artificial Respiration*, 1994, 125.

¹⁴ Irwin, *The Mystery to a Solution*, 1994, 166.

¹⁵ Woodall, *The Man in the Mirror of the Book*, 1996, 113.

¹⁶ Williamson, *Borges: A Life*, 2004, 236.

¹⁷ Iwasaki Cauti, *Borges, Unamuno y el “Quijote”*, 2005.

For Michel Lafon, “Menard, though not of a serious or visible descent in the literary world, is nevertheless a close friend and inspiration to Gide, Valéry, Miguel de Unamuno and Borges himself.”¹⁸

Alas! None of these conjectures heed the warning that Borges gave in the Prologue to *The Garden of Forking Paths*:

In *Pierre Menard* what is unreal is the destiny the protagonist imposes on himself. The list of writings I attribute to him is not too amusing but neither is it arbitrary; it constitutes a diagram of his mental history.¹⁹

The list of Menard’s writings is “not arbitrary” – it is “a diagram of his mental history”! This assertion, taken at face value, eliminates all previous conjectures. True, Unamuno²⁰ and Groussac²¹ wrote their own books on *Don Quixote*, but this is the only aspect that relates them to Menard. None of the candidates, except for Valéry and Borges, wrote poetry. And none of them had shown any interest in Leibnitz or Descartes or Wilkins. And it is Borges himself who meddled with Ramón Llull just two years prior to writing *Pierre Menard*.²²

Feeling all previous conjectures were ad hoc and superficial, later authors began looking in the opposite direction, searching for Menard’s historical namesakes.

¹⁸ Lafon, *Une vie de Pierre Ménard*, 2008.

¹⁹ en Pierre Menard autor del «Quijote» lo es el destino que su protagonista se impone. La nómina de escritos que le atribuyo no es demasiado divertida pero no es arbitraria; es un diagrama de su historia mental...

²⁰ Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), a Spanish essayist and professor at the University of Salamanca, author of *Our Lord Don Quixote* (1914).

²¹ Paul-François Groussac (1848-1929), a French-born Director of the Argentine National Library from 1885-1929, studied the provenance and authorship of the so-called *False Quixote*.

²² In 1937, Borges wrote the article “Ramón Llull’s Thinking Machine” for *El Hogar Magazine*.

Discovering a reference to poet and philosopher Louis-Nicolas Ménard in a footnote in Gustave Lanson's 1923 *Illustrated History of the French Literature*, Jason Wilson emphatically concluded: "Here was the seed. Borges saw himself as a footnote in world literature. He was a Menard."²³

While this idea resonates with the one offered by John Irwin, referencing the self-doubt that tormented Borges in the 1930s, it does not bring us closer to uncovering the identity of the protagonist. A prolific poet and writer on ancient Greece, chemist and revolutionary, Louis-Nicolas Ménard (1822-1901) had a temperament starkly different from the melancholic, nostalgia-prone philologist Pierre Menard. Neither did Louis-Nicolas write anything on Descartes, Leibnitz, Wilkins or Ramón Llull, nor did he live until 1939.²⁴

More valuable was another discovery. René Ventura found Menard's full namesake: a Dr. Pierre Menard of Nîmes (1880-1952) who in 1931 wrote a book about the importance of graphology for psychoanalysis.²⁵ There Dr. Menard argued that handwriting is "a graphic record of uncensored gestures" and thus allows one to study the personality in a precise and objective manner.²⁶

As Dr. Pierre Menard regularly contributed to several avant-garde magazines, writing on such esoteric topics as the handwriting of Marquis de Sade, his name might have been familiar to Borges.

²³ Wilson, *Jorge Luis Borges*, 2006, 88.

²⁴ Chisholm, "Ménard, Louis Nicolas", 1911.

²⁵ Ventura, *La vraie vie de Pierre Menard*, 2009.

²⁶ Menard, Pierre, *L'écriture et le subconscient: Psychanalyse et graphologie* (Paris, 1931).

Following this lead, Daniel Balderston proposed that the “insect-like handwriting” (“sus peculiares símbolos tipográficos y su letra de insecto”), attributed by Borges to his Menard, originates from this thread.²⁷

Though the discovery of Pierre Menard of Nîmes clarifies the provenance of the protagonist’s name and even one particular character trait, it is still only the tip of the iceberg – it does not explain the list of Menard’s writings, nor the reason why Menard embarked on his remarkable undertaking. Borges’ Pierre Menard warrants a deeper look. Let us search for the hints in other Borges’ stories of the same period.

V. Clearance Sacrifice

In February 1943 Borges penned *The Secret Miracle* – another masterpiece which appeared in 1944 in the collection *Artifices* that was collated with *The Garden of Forking Paths* to form *Ficciones*.²⁸

On the night of March 15, 1939, a resident of Prague, Jaromir Hladík, is haunted in a dream by the clangor of chess clocks, which after his awakening turned into the clangor of the boots of the German soldiers entering Prague. A half-Jew and a writer on esoteric topics, Hladík becomes easy prey for the Gestapo. Hladík’s high repute in the literary world is ascertained by “two or three laudatory words in Gothic script.” Such a high evaluation by a German scholar spells doom for the prisoner. The Gestapo grants Hladík a week to live. Yet, a heavenly voice in a dream promises the playwright a full year – to complete his most important work, *The Enemies*, which supposedly would change the world of drama.

²⁷ Balderston, ““His insect-like handwriting””, 2010, 125-36.

²⁸ Borges, *Ficciones*, 1993, 114-120.

The play is startlingly absurd. Although the three main characters – Baron Roemerstadt, Julia de Weidenau, and Jaroslav Kubin – form a kind of classical love triangle, only the first of the three, the Baron, seems to be present on stage. As the plot begins to go in circles, spawning occasional absurdities, at some point the spectator is expected to understand that what he sees is just a series of hallucinations of the wretched Kubin.

Hladík, the author, is trying to stay sane, and he succeeds only as much as a man living two steps away from the gallows. At night before the execution, the same heavenly voice repeats the earlier promise. Next morning, while the playwright is facing the firing squad, his consciousness acquires a second temporal dimension, which dwarfs the time in the world around him. This metamorphosis allows him to complete within two minutes the task that would in other circumstances require an entire year. We are left to believe that Hladík finished his play.

The play that Borges attributed to his hero is too much akin to Borges' own works. Indeed, the Argentinean often foregoes detailed character descriptions hastening instead to a paradoxical ending. We know that finding that his ancestors on his mother's side, the Acevedos, possibly escaped the dungeons of the Portuguese Inquisition, for some time Borges entertained the thought of being Jewish and even penned in 1934 an essay titled *I, a Jew (Yo, judío)*. In 1943, on learning what was happening to Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, Borges could have imagined himself in Gestapo dungeons. Deliberating on this, Ari Allenby proposed that Borges shaped Hladík's identity and fate as part of a search for his own Jewish roots.²⁹

²⁹ Allenby, "Rose of Yesterday", 1999.

However, for a writer as complex and multi-layered as Borges, it would be atypical to base a character on himself alone. A faithful disciple of Poe, Borges dropped some clues. They are few. By March 1939, Hladík turned 40. From 1921 until 1938, Czechoslovakia was a member of the Little Entente, a defense alliance with Yugoslavia and Romania. Let us start from here.

VI. Opening the File

Benjamin Fondane was born in Jassy, Romania, in 1898.³⁰ His family name was Wexler; in Bucharest he changed it to Fundoianu to sound Romanian;³¹ in Paris he shortened it to Fondane to sound French. An avant-garde poet at the dawn of his creative life, after he met Russian-Jewish émigré Lev Shestov [French: Léon Chestov], Fondane started writing polemical essays expounding Shestov's philosophy. From 1930-1933, he worked for *Paramount Studios*, later claiming that he had coauthored, without receiving any credit, more than a hundred Paramount scripts. After leaving Paramount, he authored two film scripts. The anti-fascist film *Rapt [Kidnapping]*, which Dimitri Kirsanoff directed in 1934 in Switzerland, survived. The absurdist *Tararira*, which Fondane himself directed in Argentina in 1936, did not.

In September 1939, Fondane, now a naturalized French citizen, was called to arms and in May-June 1940 took part in a short French-German skirmish that ended in a humiliating defeat for France. He was imprisoned, escaped, got caught but was released for health reasons. In defiance of the German decree of May 29, 1942, Fondane refused to wear a yellow-star patch and for the next two years was leading

³⁰ Carassou, 1994.

³¹ As was customary in Jewish poetic circles in Romania in the 1920s; see Avram 2015.

a semi-underground existence in Paris until March 1944 when he was turned over to the French police by a concierge. As a Jew, he was at once transferred to the Drancy internment camp near Paris, run by the SS and used for deporting Jews to the extermination camps in Poland.

As in Hladík's case, fate granted Fondane some breathing time. He spent two months in Drancy, from where he passed to his non-Jewish, non-imprisoned wife a detailed plan for publishing his works. He spent the next five months in Auschwitz, where, on the testimony of his surviving campmate, he engaged his fellow inmates in discussions of the fate of literature. He was gassed on October 3, 1944.

The literary output Fondane left behind is quite voluminous. In addition to 25 literary reviews and two collections of poetry, *Ulysses* (1933) and *Titanic* (1937), the published prose (literary criticism and philosophy) included journal articles on Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, André Gide, Paul Valéry, Henri Bergson, André Breton, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud; and books *Rimbaud le voyou* (1933), *La Conscience malheureuse* (1936), and *Faux Traité d'esthétique* (1938).

The corpus of Fondane's posthumous publications is also diverse and impressive: a critical study *Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre*; three essays devoted to Lev Shestov, Lucien Lévy-Brühl and the Romanian philosopher Stéphane Lupasco; two war-time poems *Le Mal des fantômes* and *Au temps du poème*; a piece of an undetermined genre, titled *Eaux-Mères*; two plays, *Le Festin de Balthazar* and *Philoctète*, started in Romania but finished in France not long before his arrest.³²

³² Hyde, *Benjamin Fondane*, 1971; Freedman, *Bibliographie*, 2009, 2019.

VII. A Windmill

Borges and Fondane met in Buenos Aires twice: first in 1929 and again in 1936.

Victoria Ocampo, a rich heiress and feminist who annually toured Europe in search of new ideas that could benefit Latin America, visited Shestov in 1928 and befriended Fondane whom she met there. On her invitation and under sponsorship of Asociación Amigos del Arte, Fondane visited Buenos Aires in August 1929 with the formal purpose of presenting avant-garde films, mainly French and Soviet, to a wide audience. The presentation of *The Andalusian Dog* caused a scandal.³³

Fondane also delivered a lecture, *Léon Chestov et la lutte contre les évidences* [*Leon Shestov and The Struggle with Certainties*] to the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Buenos Aires.³⁴



Benjamin Fondane, Buenos Aires, 1929.

Archive of O. Salazar-Ferrer

³³ Ocampo, *Testimonios*, sexta serie, Buenos Aires: Sur, 1963, 250.

³⁴ Cozarinsky, "Benjamin Fondane en la Argentina." 2006. The only extant manuscript of that lecture has the title *Un Nouveau Visage de Dieu: Léon Chestov mystique russe* [A New Face of God: mystical Russian Lev Shestov] and was published in *Europe*, 1998, 110.

The summer issue of Ocampo's *Sur* in 1931 featured Fondane's essay, *El cinema en el atolladero [The Cinema in a Quagmire]*. Borges was on *Sur*'s editorial board and almost certainly attended the films and the aforesaid lecture given by Fondane.³⁵

The "struggle with certainties" closely resembles – nay, is almost identical to – *tilting at windmills*. Here was the seed for *Pierre Menard* that would sprout in Borges' mind for the next decade when it burst into bloom.

Fondane's first overseas voyage engendered *Ulysses*, a collection of verse that was published in 1933. The second voyage over the Atlantic gave birth to *Titanic*, another collection of verse published in 1937. Pierre Menard, his would-be compatriot and comrade-in-verse, tacitly recognized the worth of both poetic collections when he invoked the similar marine-sounding titles of Rimbaud's *Drunken Ship* and Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*. Victoria Ocampo remembered:

He kept writing and publishing books. *Rimbaud le voyou* was one of them. He lived very modestly, with his wife and his sister. When I spent time in Paris, Fondane always visited me. We discussed amicably though he was very argumentative. This lasted for years.³⁶

In June 1939 in Paris, Fondane handed Victoria Ocampo his most treasured possession – his memoir about meetings with Lev Shestov. Despite Ocampo's protests, Fondane twice repeated his premonition that they would not see each other again. The poet felt the war approaching – and his intuition did not deceive him.

³⁵ In August 1929, Borges' brother-in-law Guillermo de Torre wrote a review about Fondane's film presentation in *Revista Síntesis* N° 28, the magazine where de Torre and Borges were editors.

³⁶ Ocampo, *Testimonios*, sexta serie, 1963, 251: "Seguía escribiendo y publicando libros. Rimbaud le voyou fue uno de ellos. Vivía muy modestamente, con su mujer y su hermana. Cuando yo pasaba temporadas en Paris, Fondane no dejaba de visitarme. Discutíamos amigablemente. pues era muy discutidor. Así durante años."

After France's defeat in June 1940, unaware of Fondane's fate, Victoria published in the July 1940 issue of *Sur* an excerpt from Fondane's memoir, *Sur les Rives de l'Ilissus*, in a Spanish translation. Did we discover the Baroness de Bacourt?

Not necessarily. Borges was surely mocking Fondane when writing about "a cycle of admirable sonnets (1934)," which Menard dedicated to the Baroness. Though Fondane's *Ulysses* (1933) carries a short dedication to his brother-in-law, and *Titanic* (1937) has no dedication at all, Fondane initially wanted to dedicate his *Rimbaud le voyou* (1933) to Victoria Ocampo, who, however, refused the honor. Thus, the "Baroness" was likely modeled after someone else.

In March-April 1939, despite Hitler's takeover of Czechoslovakia, the fates of France and Fondane, viewed from South America, do not yet seem tragic. Upon returning from hospital, Borges seeks initial feedback on his ideas – he reads the new opus to Victoria's younger sister Silvina Ocampo, a budding writer and fiancée of his close friend and long-time collaborator, Adolfo Bioy Casares. These two could understand all the intimate details of his opus, all the sarcasm – not accidentally Borges-2 admits that he got acquainted with the "late lamented poet" [Menard] at "the unforgettable *vendredis* of the Baroness de Bacourt."³⁷ Such weekly Friday receptions were held by Silvina and Bioy Casares since their marriage in 1934.

Borges' wit and subtlety were most certainly appreciated there – *Pierre Menard* was dedicated to Silvina Ocampo. The name "de Bacourt" given to the Baroness is a *francified* acronym of Adolfo Bioy Casares' family names.

³⁷ La baronesa de Bacourt (en cuyos vendredis inolvidables tuve el honor de conocer al llorado poeta)

VIII. Castling Queenside

However, “Countess Bagnoregio of the Principality of Monaco” is Silvina’s elder sister, Victoria Ocampo. Victoria’s first husband was Monaco Estrada. The journal *Luxe* where the Countess published “an open letter” is a mock title for the literary review *Sur* founded by Victoria. The journal enjoyed a high literary reputation, combining all the features that the word ‘Luxe’ promises in the English translation: wealth, style and splendor.³⁸



Sur Editorial, 1940.

Standing: Borges (second from the left), Victoria Ocampo (second from the right)

What about “Gabrielle D’Annunzio,” this namesake of a famous decadent Italian poet, pilot, and fascist? There is no evidence that Victoria met D’Annunzio on her trip to Italy in 1934. But it was on that trip that she was introduced to Benito Mussolini and presented him with her book on Dante *De Francesca a Beatrice*.

³⁸ King, “Towards a Reading of the Argentine Literary Magazine *Sur*”, 1981, 57-78.

Thus, “Gabriele D’Annunzio” could be a code name either for Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, a French writer, fascist, and Victoria’s lover, who organized her meeting with Mussolini, or, more likely, a veiled reference to the Duce himself. Indeed, though a poet, D’Annunzio was also a *Duce* (though on a smaller scale) in a short-lived Italian Regency of Carnaro at Fiume (modern Croatia). His ideas influenced Italian fascism and Mussolini himself.

Finally, the “victorious volume” is an explicit reference to Victoria’s *Testimonios*, a volume of essays published in Madrid in 1935, a diary of her travels with sketches of famous personalities she met.³⁹

The “international philanthropist Simon Kautsch” closely associated with Countess Bagnoreggio seems to be a mix of two characters, a device Borges used more than once in this story.

The last name of the “international philanthropist” points to Hermann von Keyserling, a Baltic German philosopher and founder of the *Society for Free Philosophy* at Darmstadt. A supporter of Social Darwinism and an oppositionist to German militarism, he was quite popular among European intellectuals in the 1920-30s. Keyserling was Ocampo’s guest in Buenos Aires in 1929.

The German-sounded name, *Kautsch*, is a play on several words and meanings. In German ‘Kautschuk’ means ‘rubber’, which might be a veiled reference to the condom, while in English it sounds as ‘couch’. Both meanings might be a pointer to the well-known Keyserling’s sexual overtures to Victoria.⁴⁰

³⁹ The second volume appeared in Buenos Aires in 1941. Since then, nine more volumes followed.

⁴⁰ Kaminsky, *Argentina*, 2008, ch. 5, “Victoria Ocampo and the Keyserling Effect.”

The unmistakably Jewish first name of the “international philanthropist” most likely is a reference to another close friend of Victoria – Waldo Frank, a Jewish novelist, historian, and political activist from New York, famous for his 1929 lecture tour of Latin America. Frank went on this tour with the purpose to “unite the two continents into one America.”⁴¹ He enjoyed enormous success: in Buenos Aires he was feted at banquets and cheered by crowds in the streets.⁴²

It was Frank who conceived an idea of a South American *literary review* and convinced Ocampo it was feasible. In an open letter to Frank that she put into the first issue of *Sur*, Victoria wrote: “Waldo, in a just sense, this review belongs to you and to all those who surround me now and in the future.”⁴³



Waldo Frank and Victoria Ocampo (1934)

Waldo Frank Papers, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania

Victoria Ocampo visited the United States on Frank’s invitation in 1930. It is known that in 1943 Victoria paid a second visit to the USA. Borges seems to tell us that in

⁴¹ Frank, *America Hispana*, 1931.

⁴² Sitman, “(Re)Discovering America in Buenos Aires”, 2015.

⁴³ Meyer, *Victoria Ocampo*, 1979, 111.

March-April of 1939, before coming to Europe in June, she was also touring the USA, and, specifically, meeting Frank in Pittsburgh.

Borges was not altogether wrong when he mockingly elevated Victoria Ocampo to the nobility. After the Second World War, she became a Commander of the Order of the British Empire and later, in 1976, the first female member of the Argentine Academy of Letters. More importantly, she displayed a character trait worthy of those awards: loyalty to her friends and beliefs. In the sixth volume of *Testimonios*, Ocampo defended Fondane's memory against Romanian author C. Virgil Gheorghiu, who on his visit to Argentina tried to belittle Fondane's poetic legacy:

On September 29, Fondane and his sister entered the gas chamber. This is how Nazism punished, in the person of a writer who had never dedicated himself to politics, three crimes: first, and most serious of all, being born a Jew; second, having no other treasure in the world than an envelope full of letters from Chestov; third, confronting his enemies, criminals, with the sharpness and irony of an intellectual.⁴⁴

IX. A Double Check

What about the 'definition' that Countess Bagnoregio was known for?

Victoria Ocampo wrote about André Malraux, born in 1901: "I know of no genius who *defies any definition* like this Frenchman born on the threshold of the 20th century."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ocampo, *Testimonios*, 1963, 251: "El 29 de septiembre, Fondane y su hermana entraron en la cámara de gas. Así castigó el nazismo, en la persona de un escritor que jamás se había dedicado a la política, tres crímenes: primero., y más grave de todos, el haber nacido judío; segundo, el no poseer otro tesoro en el mundo que un sobre lleno de cartas de Chestov; tercero, el comentar a sus enemigos, criminales, con la agudeza y la ironía de un intelectual."

⁴⁵ "No conozco genio más difícil de definir que el de éste francés nacido en el umbral del siglo XX."

Borges reapplied this controversial ‘definition’ by “Countess Bagnoregio” – which in fact is a *negation* of a definition – to his hero with biting sarcasm at its last part: Fondane, a naturalized Frenchman, was also born on the “threshold of the 20th century”, though on the *other* side of it, in 1898. Fondane certainly was proud of becoming a Frenchman after 15 years of residency in France. Borges viewed this with condescension.

Fondane was on Borges’ mind in 1939. Ricardo Nirenberg discovered Fondane’s name in a classic Borgesian venomous footnote to the April 1939 French translation of *The Approach to Al-Mutasim*, another story from *The Garden of Forking Paths*:

En France, le livre [de Mir Bahadour Ali] semble être passé inaperçu. Toutefois, Benjamin Fondane le mentionne dans *Europe*, et le définit en ces termes : ‘De la diversité, du brio, un agencement ponctuel, un art précis et ingénieux qui sait décevoir autant que combler, le sens inné de l’étrange ; partout du talent, voire par moments une force qui ressemble à du génie. Bref : zéro.’

(In France, [Mir Bahadour Ali’s] book appears to have been unnoticed. However, Benjamin Fondane mentions it in the journal *Europe*, and defines it thus: ‘Diversity, brilliance, an impeccable arrangement, a precise and ingenious technique, which knows how to satisfy as well as disappoint, an innate sense for what is strange or exotic; talent everywhere, at times a force akin to genius. In short: zero.’)⁴⁶

‘In short: zero’! Here is indeed Fondane’s critical style in a nutshell, which he honed attacking his celebrity contemporaries. Fondane’s attacks against Paul Valéry, a poet revered in the *Sur* circle, were well known. From 1930 on in journal articles and his last published essay *Faux Traité d’esthétique* (1938), Fondane chastises the French

⁴⁶ Nirenberg, “Jorge Luis Borges and the European Visitors”, 2006. This footnote appears, too, in the *Pléiade* edition of Borges’ *Complete Works* (vol. I, p. 1536, n 1).

symbolist poet for the “negation of chance,” “negation of the individual self in the poem” and other imaginary symbolist ‘sins’.⁴⁷ These ‘invectives’ could hardly escape Borges’ attention, as the Argentine himself wrote poetry until his death.

But if Menard is Fondane, why did Borges make his hero much older, dating Menard’s first work to 1899, when Fondane was only one year old? Where are the said Leibniz and Descartes or Wilkins and Ramón Llull after all? And finally, why refer to Menard as the “late lamented poet”? Was not Fondane still alive in 1939?

X. Can Opener

The first clue, the “influence of Nietzsche,” attributed to Menard by the Baroness de Bacourt without clear justification, comes from Fondane’s memoirs, *Sur les rives de l’Ilyssus*. A recent immigrant from Romania, Fondane recounts his first encounter and subsequent numerous conversations with his mentor, philosopher Lev Shestov. At one of their meetings in 1935, Shestov described his first philosophical exploits, in particular his encounter with Nietzsche’s writings:

At that time I read Kant, Shakespeare and the Bible. At once I felt an antagonism toward Kant. Shakespeare impressed me so much that I lost sleep. Then I began reading Nietzsche. I felt that the world was turned upside down. I cannot describe the impression it made upon me [...]. I could not sleep searching for arguments to defeat his horrible, merciless thought. Surely, Nature is cruel and indifferent. Surely, it kills coldly and mercilessly. But Thought is not Nature. No reason should it kill the weak, pushing them to the brink to help Nature in its horrible business!⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Salazar-Ferrer, “Benjamin Fondane et l’idéal valéryen”, 2004.

⁴⁸ Fondane, “Conversations with Lev Shestov.” [October 4, 1935].

Born in Kyiv in 1866 as Yehuda Leib Shvartsman, Shestov studied law in Moscow but turned to philosophy in his thirties. The shock a young Russian Jew experienced after encountering contemporary Western philosophy marks the beginning of a prolific literary career. Shestov debuted in literature in 1898 (only a year before Menard) with an essay titled *Shakespeare and His Critic Brandes*. Next Shestov published two volumes: *The Good in the Teachings of Tolstoy and Nietzsche* (1900) and *The Philosophy of Tragedy: Dostoevsky and Nietzsche* (1903), which gained him fame in Russia and later, in the 1920s, gave him entry to French philosophical circles as an equal. In 1925 Lucien Lévy-Bruhl opened for him the pages of *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*, saying to the critics: “I totally disagree with Chestov. But he is a man of talent and he has the right to express his ideas.”⁴⁹



Lev Shestov / Léon Chestov (Paris, 1930s)

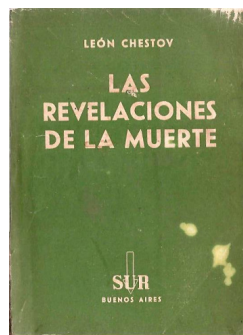
The 12 volumes of Shestov’s prose include 50+ different essays on Luther, Pascal, Descartes, Spinoza, Shakespeare, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Plotinus, Parmenides, Edmund Husserl, Henrik Ibsen, William James, Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, and some

⁴⁹ Fondane, “Conversations with Lev Shestov.” [July 16, 1935].

other Russian writers; a collection of aphorisms *A Thousand and One Nights*; and the last work that became his crowning achievement, *Athens and Jerusalem*.⁵⁰

Remarkably, the list is not dissimilar to Borges' own – all the above names are casually dropped in Borges' stories. Later Borges widened the list with more names, but the core is Shestov's. To be convinced, one needs only to compare the names in Borges' writings before 1938 (Hernández, Lugones, Carriego of the Argentinean poets; Conrad, Hawthorn, Kipling, Milton of the English classics) and after 1938. Even Borges' later-in-life obsession with *A Thousand and One Nights* was likely rooted in the playful title of Shestov's collection of aphorisms. This may answer definitively Michel Lafon's question "has Pierre Menard engendered Borges?"⁵¹

Shestov's masterpiece *Revelations of Death* comprised of two essays, "The Conquest of the Self-Evident" on Dostoevsky's philosophy and "The Last Judgment" on Leo Tolstoy's last works, was published first in Paris in 1929 under the title *In Job's Balances* and then in Buenos Aires in 1938 under the title of *Las Revelaciones de la Muerte*.



León Chestov, *Las Revelaciones de la Muerte* (Buenos Aires, Sur, 1938)

⁵⁰ Finkenthal, *Lev Shestov: Existential Philosopher and Religious Thinker*, 2010.

⁵¹ Lafon, *Borges ou la réécriture*, 1990, 48.

The latter book was put out by the publishing house *Sur*, so Borges could hardly miss it. Moreover, an excerpt, a part of the essay on Dostoevsky, “The Conquest of the Self-Evident,” preceded by a short necrology, appeared in the December 1938 issue of *Sur* just prior to Borges’ fateful head injury. One can imagine what came first to the mind of the convalescing fiction writer in the spring of 1939!

XI. Interposition

Fondane did not speak Russian. Shestov spoke a little French. The language and the difference in age and experience at first created a barrier. Shestov did not immediately recognize the talent in the young Jewish poet from Romania. After their brief encounter in 1924, two years passed before their stars aligned. In 1926, Fondane reads Shestov’s *The Philosophy of Tragedy: Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche* and writes a letter to the author. Several lines convince the Master that he has acquired a disciple:

I have spent my youth being in awe of skeptics. [...] I used to think this was the noblest posture of all. Today I want none of it anymore. Yet I’d like to finally discover what it is that I really want. I find you alone on this path and I am delighted I found you but I am also scared. With you I can define the question but I cannot reach the answer. Though I am still reluctant to follow you, my fear is full of delight. Do not laugh at me! I wish all this were nothing but amateurish talk. You say that one needs to have gone through a disaster to overcome the obstacle and I do not dare to wish a disaster upon myself. Would I ever get there on my own?⁵²

⁵² Fondane, “Conversations with Lev Shestov.” [January 17, 1927].

This confession breaks the ice, though for many years Fondane remains merely a listener. Here is a recollection from one of their earlier meetings:

Unforgettable afternoons! Scarcely had I arrived, Chestov prepared the tea, and, I don't know how, after the first banalities having been exchanged and the day's events exfoliated, dusk found us plunged into a full tide of philosophic dialogue. Dialogue? I flatter myself! It was a monologue, I was scarcely present, a veritable dialogue of the soul with itself. For years, I never dared to intrude; I snatched scraps of this fulgurating stream of thought, from which I had to remove the skin and pips, those numerous Latin and Greek texts to which I later got accustomed. When I became slightly more *au courant*, I understood that it was better not to intervene in the monologue, nor raise contradictions, nor show signs of my difficulties. I formed the habit of weighing the substance at home, attempting to resolve the doubts myself, to guess the answers, to await them at the corner. I felt one ought not to ask questions. I knew these questions Chestov had already asked himself, and the less possible the answer, the more important the question appeared to him.⁵³

Inspired by these meetings, Fondane began dabbling in philosophy. Yet for many years the Master does not take his disciple very seriously. At his home reception in 1928, pointing to Fondane, Shestov jokingly tells Victoria Ocampo: "Be careful! He is an assassin – he likes heads to roll!"

In 1933, despite the lengthy process of getting his book on Rimbaud approved and published, Fondane exclaims: "I can wait, I have all the time in the world!" – while Shestov again ironically comments: "It is obvious that you are a true philosopher – you resign yourself so readily!"

⁵³ Fondane, "Conversations with Lev Shestov."

Yet, before his death, Shestov wrote to Fondane:

But you are not ignorant in philosophy! You must not, out of modesty, let them [editors] think that if only you knew... You did not arrive at philosophy by the usual road, that's true. But fortunately this allows you to be more daring in questioning, to question knowledge... Do not let them off the hook so easily by permitting them to treat you as a poet, a mystic. You are a philosopher.⁵⁴

The dying Shestov absolves Fondane of his sin, a sin of amateurism. Though the poet lacked systematic training in classical philosophy, his mentor had let him enter the exalted ranks. Was it a blessing or a curse? Talking about philosophy, Fondane strove to be a philosopher. He thought philosophy was a game, akin to chess. He declares: "I would rewrite my *Faux Traité d'esthétique* for the sheer pleasure of refuting it." Isn't this exactly Menard's "resigned or ironic habit of propounding ideas that were the exact opposite of those he espoused"⁵⁵?

XII. Discovered Attack

From where does Menard's portrait come? The first extensive, six-page Shestov necrology appeared in the March 1939 issue of *Sur* and was authored by Jouri Mandelstamm, a son-in-law of Igor Stravinsky, Victoria Ocampo's close friend:

Russian literature and thought – I would say that even universal literature and philosophy – have suffered a great loss with the death of León Chestov. The truly worldwide fame of that author, of rare value, allows me to dispense with the trivial praises usual in such cases. If not for his works, Chestov's name is known to the

⁵⁴ Fondane, "Conversations with Lev Shestov." [January 13, 1936].

⁵⁵ su hábito resignado o irónico de propagar ideas que eran el estricto reverso de las preferidas por él.

cultivated people of all countries. His major books have been translated into French, English, Spanish, German, Italian and other languages. The readers of *Sur* have had a scoop of some writings of the deceased philosopher. In recent years, both literati and thinkers alike began citing the works of Chestov, whom they considered, quite rightly, as one of the freest and most original thinkers of our time.

And here is Menard's work, which is "subterranean, intermittently heroic and unequalled."

However, fame and respect do not mean a true understanding. Indeed, it was difficult not to notice the vast culture of Chestov, the depth and constant vivacity of his thought and above all his personal integrity. But there is a big leap between admitting these facts and accepting his philosophy, more emotional than rational. The critical or negative part of his work, which is perhaps the most significant, seemed especially suspicious to the followers of classical idealist philosophy – the Kantians, the Hegelians, not to mention the Marxists.

And so here are 'Protestants' and 'Masons' in the guise of Marxists!

It would be too reckless for me to summarize the essence of Chestov's immense philosophical heritage in a few pages. I can only trace the major guidelines of his work and offer some general reflections... Though Chestov opened the eyes of everyone who wanted to see reality, he encouraged the debate of his theories, because he did not wish to force anyone to accept them. According to the great precept of Pascal, he did not 'teach' but 'ignite.'

"Ignite"! And here is Menard's habit to set "gay bonfires" of his notebooks.

For fourteen years, from book to book, Chestov developed his concept of a new philosophy, which he called 'existential.' In Russia he published several books, both critical and constructive, that gave him a reputation: *The good according to Nietzsche and Tolstoy* (1909); *Nietzsche and Dostoevsky: the philosophy of tragedy*

(1903); *The apotheosis of uprooting* (1905); *The principles and the ends* (1908); *The great evenings* (1912). The war and the Russian revolution interrupted his work. He resumed it only after 1920, in Switzerland and then in Paris. Despite the unfavorable conditions of life, it is in emigration that he published his fundamental works *Potestas clavium* (1923) and *In Job's Balances* (1929). He then undertook a comprehensive study of the philosophy of the Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard, existential philosopher par excellence. This work did not appear in French until 1936. Through Kierkegaard Chestov appreciated Pascal and drew closer to religious philosophy. His last book, *Athens and Jerusalem*, impregnated if not with faith, at least with a sincere desire to believe, was composed just months before his death.

“For fourteen years, from book to book”! Compare it with Menard’s ironic remark that “philosophers publish in pleasant volumes the intermediary stages of their work,” while he, Menard, decided “to lose them.”

A particular feature shocks those who set out to explore Chestov’s work: the intimate contact he always had with literature in the true sense of the word, that is, the *belle lettres*. In all his books, he referred much less to recognized philosophers than to novelists and poets. He chose as his mentors not Kant, Hegel and Schelling, but Shakespeare, Ibsen, Nietzsche (who, being a philosopher, is no less a poet) and especially the two great masters of the Russian novel: Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

Not Kant but Nietzsche! The Baroness de Bacourt is justified!

This feature of Chestov may seem not important. However, it reveals the secret mechanism of his thought, one of the essential reasons for his anti-idealist position. He always tried to pursue his goals through literature, since he did not distinguish between it and real life. If, on the other hand, he leaned very little towards pure philosophy, it is because he considered it far removed from real life, viewing it as a useless, even harmful, mental speculation. This explains the absence of a cogent

philosophical system in his works, for lack of which his adversaries reproached him. Yet, it is ridiculous to suppose that Chestov, who had incomparable reasoning and a propensity for exact exegesis manifested in his endless commentaries, was incapable of constructing such a system. But he did not believe in its necessity and, especially, in its usefulness. He endorsed Pascal's famous observation: "To mock philosophy is to philosophize truly."

"A lack of a cogent philosophical system" and "disbelief in its necessity and usefulness"! Compare it with Menard's "there is no intellectual exercise which is not ultimately useless." And "the secret mechanism" – does not it remind of Menard's "secret undertaking"?!

However, the list of Shestov's writings in the necrology seems complete. What about the "fallacious catalogue" of Menard's works that Madame Henri Bachelier has published in the "Protestant newspaper whose readers are few and Calvinist (if not Masonic or Jewish)"? *Sur* certainly was not a "newspaper with protestant tendencies"?!

XIII. A Breakthrough

The only Shestov obituary with the list of his writings that appeared outside *Sur* before March 1939 was an anonymous obituary in the *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* (January-February 1939 issue):

Léon Chestov

Born on January 31, 1866, in Kyiv, Léon Chestov died in exile in Paris on November 22, 1938. He was the first Russian philosopher to arouse European interest in his ideas, although he didn't miss any opportunity to fight against the

speculative “Royal Way” (« voie royale ») of the European philosophical thought. From his early works: *Good in the Teaching of Tolstoy and Nietzsche, Philosophy of Tragedy, Revelations of Death, Gethsemane Night, In Job’s Balances, Potestas Clavium*, to his last: *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy* and *Athens and Jerusalem* (most of them translated into French by Boris de Schloezer), either as epistemologist or as historian of philosophy, L. Chestov intended to undertake the task of constructing (« la tâche d’édifier») a *Critique of Pure Reason* – the critique, which, in his view, Kant had not even tried.⁵⁶

(Re)Constructing Kant’s major opus, *Critique of Pure Reason*! What a remarkable idea! From this – and not from a request that Borges’ father made to his son to rewrite his novel *El Caudillo*, as Edwin Williamson conjectured⁵⁷ – comes Menard’s idea of rewriting *Don Quixote*.

Almost certainly, Borges saw the obituary by March 1939. Thus, the “Protestant newspaper whose readers are few and Calvinist (if not Masonic or Jewish)” is *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger*, run by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, while “Calvinist” is an allusion to Geneva and thus, as we shall see, to Shestov.

But where did Shestov express this outlandish idea of rewriting Kant’s major work?

In the very same *Revelations of Death*, where chapter V says:

⁵⁶ Né le 31 janvier 1866, à Kiev, Léon Chestov est mort, en terre d’exil, à Paris, le 22 novembre : il était le premier philosophe russe qui ait su intéresser l’Europe à sa pensée, bien qu’il n’ait manqué aucune occasion de se dresser contre la « voie royale » spéculative, empruntée par la pensée européenne. Depuis ses premiers ouvrages : *L’Idée de bien chez Tolstoï et Nietzsche, La Philosophie de la tragédie, Les Révélations de la mort, La Nuit de Gethsémani*, en passant par *Les Balances de Job, Le Pouvoir des clefs* et jusqu’à ses derniers : *Kierkegaard et la Philosophie existentielle et Athènes et Jérusalem* (traduits pour la plupart en français par Boris de Schloezer), soit comme gnoséologue, soit comme historien de la philosophie, L. Chestov s’est proposé la tâche d’édifier une *Critique de la Raison Pure* – critique à laquelle, de son avis, Kant ne s’était même pas essayé.

⁵⁷ Williamson, *Borges: A Life*, 2004, 232 and 236.

Yet, if ever a *critique of pure reason* was written, it is to Dostoevsky that we must go to seek it... What Kant gave us under this title is not a critique but an apology of pure reason. Kant did not dare to criticize reason, although he believed himself to have awakened under Hume's influence from dogmatic slumber. How did Kant put his question? Mathematics exists, the natural sciences exist: is a science of metaphysics possible, with a logical structure like that of the already sufficiently established positive sciences? That is what Kant called "criticizing" and "waking from dogmatic slumber." But if he had really wished to awake and criticize, he would first of all have asked the question, whether the positive sciences had really established themselves, whether they had the right to call their achievements "knowledge." Is not all that they have to teach us lies and illusion? Kant had so little awakened from his dogmatic slumber that he never thought of asking this question...

Thus, Kant "did not awaken from his slumber" and must be awakened! Why not awaken other greats, a reader may think, Cervantes for one?!

XIV. A Battery

Cervantes entertained his readers with two heroes; Borges decided to get by with just one. To readers of *Pierre Menard*, Borges drops a clue by casually mentioning Alphonse Daudet's idea of combining the two heroes of Cervantes, Ingenious Gentleman and his Squire, into *one* figure, that of Tartarin of Tarascon. And here is Daudet himself:

Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in one and the same man! You will readily comprehend what a cat-and-dog couple they made! What strife! What a clapper-clawing! Oh, what a fine dialogue for Lucian or Saint-Evrémonde to write, between

the two Tartarins: Quixote-Tartarin and Sancho-Tartarin! Quixote-Tartarin gets inflamed on the stories of Gustave Aimard⁵⁸ and shouts: “Up and at ‘em!” – while Sancho-Tartarin thinks only of the rheumatics ahead and murmurs: “I mean to stay at home.”

Daudet’s idea was both simple and extravagant: to portray a man with Quixote’s soul and Panza’s body. In his *Ultraist Manifesto* (Nosotros XXXIX, p. 468, Buenos Aires, 1921) young Borges generalized it as

Síntesis de dos o más imágenes en una, que ensancha de ese modo su facultad de sugerencia (synthesis of two or more images into one, thus widening its suggestiveness).⁵⁹

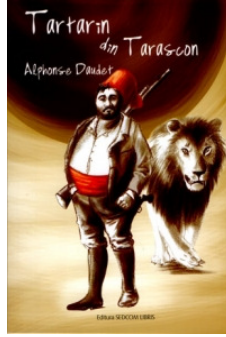
Daudet’s idea, which the author of *Ultraist Manifesto* appropriated for poetry, lay dormant for 18 years. In March 1939, while staying in hospital after his head injury, Borges brought the idea back to life. There, on a hospital bed, a Shestov-Fondane tandem was born, impersonated in Pierre Menard.

Obviously, the hero had to have been born in Nîmes, the birthplace of Alphonse Daudet. A prominent resident of Nîmes, graphologist Dr. Pierre Menard, then provided a handy name for the protagonist. The “insect-like handwriting” that Borges discerned in Shestov’s inscriptions must have fascinated him.

One curious detail in Daudet’s novel certainly adds some hidden value. The old lion, a casualty of Tartarin’s adventure in Algeria, is reminiscent of Shestov’s first name, Léon [Russian: Лев, literally: ‘lion’]. Whatever value one could discern in Shestov’s philosophy, Borges assumed, Fondane, his disciple, *killed* (i.e., trivialized) it all.

⁵⁸ Gustave Aimard (1818–1883) authored numerous books on Latin America and the American frontier.

⁵⁹ Running, *Borges’ Ultraist Movement and its Poets*, 1981, 15.



Alphonse Daudet, *Tartarin of Tarascon* (Paris, 1872)

XV. En Passant

Menard's writings include several titles on Leibniz and Descartes, whose names are only briefly mentioned in *Las Revelaciones* and *separately* – one in the first, another in the second essay. To find them placed one against another, we need to open another work by Shestov, *Athènes et Jérusalem*, published in Paris in 1938 and which most likely found its way to Buenos Aires by the spring of 1939.

In the Introduction, Shestov discusses the conflict between Leibniz and Descartes about the *universality* of two scientific principles: the (logical) principle of contradiction and the (philosophical) principle of sufficient reason. The word 'universality' might have prompted Menard into mistaken belief that Leibniz's and Descartes' ideas have 'affinity' with the "universal language" of John Wilkins.⁶⁰ No reference to the original source of Menard's erudition is given, of course, but a hint: Menard is said to have written a *fancy chess tractate* and translated into French the *famous chess treatise* by 16th century Spanish grandmaster Ruy López de Segura.⁶¹

⁶⁰ In his undated "Analytical language of John Wilkins" Borges, on spurious evidence, alleged that Descartes was the first to propose, in a 1629 letter, the idea of a "general language."

⁶¹ Libro de la invención liberal y arte del juego del axedrez. *Ficciones*, 1993, 30, lacks 'liberal.'

Well, in the guessing game where the answer is *Chestov* the only admissible close word is *chess*.

The Introduction may well have been the only part of *Athènes et Jérusalem* that Borges glanced through piecing together different threads of *Pierre Menard*, as the details of this work added little to Menard's portrait. Yet, he kept Shestov's book on his desk, as it served as a catalyst for creating *The Secret Miracle* in 1943.

In the first chapter of *Athènes et Jérusalem*, "The bound Parmenides," Shestov writes:

Human consciousness, which wishes and is able to look in the eyes of death, is consciousness of a different dimension than the one that turns away from and forgets death.⁶²

– and here is Jaromir Hladík looking in the eyes of death, whose conscience acquires a different dimension to enable him to finalize his complex play within two minutes before his death.

In the third chapter, "On the philosophy of the Middle Ages," Shestov emphasizes:

Only such a philosophy can call itself Judaeo-Christian, a philosophy which proposes not to accept but to overcome self-evidences and which introduces into our thought a new dimension: faith.⁶³

– and here is Jaromir Hladík, half-Jew, half-Christian, an ethno-religious embodiment of Shestov's philosophy.

Aphorism LI ("The Empirical Personality") of the fourth chapter, "On the second dimension of thought," states:

⁶² Shestov, *ibid*, 110.

⁶³ Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, 1966, 371-372.

Only alone with ourselves, under the impenetrable veil of the mystery of individual existence do we sometimes dare to renounce the real or illusory rights and privileges which we possess due to being a part of the world. Then penultimate and ultimate truths suddenly shine before our eyes – but they appear more like dreams than truths. We forget them easily, as we forget our dreams.⁶⁴

Borges did not forget the truth of this statement: Hladík's revelation comes in a dream.

XVI. J'adoube

Borges-2 describes Menard's legacy as follows:

Menard (perhaps without wishing to) has enriched, by means of a new technique, the hesitant and rudimentary art of reading: the technique is one of *deliberate anachronism* and *erroneous attribution*.⁶⁵

Yet, Menard is not guilty of these two sins. Nowhere does he ascribe his own thoughts to Cervantes – and so no deliberate anachronism – and nowhere did he blur the distance between himself and Cervantes – and so no erroneous attribution! The net result of Menard's project is rather a *deliberate appropriation*. However, the provenance of Borges-2's "slip of the pen" is clear: he imputed to Menard the same flaw that critics used to accuse Shestov of! Indeed, Shestov's ability to attribute his own thoughts to the authors he was citing was so notorious that Nikolai Berdyaev even coined a word for it: *shestovizing*.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Shestov, *ibid*, 429-430.

⁶⁵ Menard (acaso sin quererlo) ha enriquecido mediante una técnica nueva el arte detenido y rudimentario de la lectura: la técnica del anacronismo deliberado y de las atribuciones erróneas.

⁶⁶ Fondane, "Conversations with Lev Shestov" [October 4, 1935].

Let us examine, for example, Shestov's comment on a passage from *The Critique of Pure Reason* that he cites in *Athènes et Jérusalem*:

Here is Kant's confession stated with extraordinary frankness: "Experience, which is content to tell us *what is* but does *not* tell us *why* it is so *necessarily*, does not give us Knowledge. It irritates rather than satisfies our Reason which avidly aspires to universal and necessary judgments."

And here is Shestov's take on it:

It is hard to exaggerate the importance of such a confession, coming especially from the author of *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Experience and Fact irritate us because they do not give us Knowledge. It is not Knowledge that Fact or Experience bring us. Knowledge is something quite different from Experience or Fact. It is Reason that seeks, with all its powers, Knowledge, which we never succeed in finding either in Fact or Experience.

The last three sentences are an example of *erroneous attribution* or even *projection*: a forceful imposition of Shestov's own views. In the Introduction to *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant says that Knowledge *begins* with Fact delivered by Experience, though it does not *advance* without having an *explanation of* the Fact with Reason acting as a midwife. To justify his own anti-Science stance Shestov twists Kant's words twice. First, he pretends that Fact and Experience give us something different from Knowledge, and then that they do not give us Knowledge at all!

Tongue-in-cheek, Borges-2 pointed that the most natural way for Menard to succeed in his undertaking would be:

to learn Spanish, to re-embrace the Catholic faith, to fight against Moors and Turks, to forget European history between 1602 and 1918, and be Miguel de Cervantes.

Pierre Menard studied this procedure but rejected it as too easy.⁶⁷

Borges-2 seems again off the mark – how, in the 20th century, could one possibly fight against Moors and Turks?! But this could be another veiled hint at Shestov who evaded fighting in WW1 though he spent all four war years in a Russia that faced fierce battles with the Ottoman Turks in the Caucasus in 1914-1918, and, visiting Mandatory Palestine in 1936, ran away from the Arab riots.

Another proposal by Borges-2 also hides a nuanced mockery: many contemporary French Jews indeed converted, or were ready to convert, to Christianity.⁶⁸ Henri Bergson did; Fondane and Shestov did not – though the latter possibly “studied this procedure but rejected it as too easy.”⁶⁹

Shestov certainly tried, but failed, to master French at the academic level. And here is Shestov telling Fondane on how he blazed his trail in philosophy:

I did not study philosophy at university, and this allowed me to keep my freedom of thought. I am often chastised for quoting passages that nobody ever quotes, for uncovering texts that were left ignored. It is just possible that, had I had gone through a proper training in philosophy, I too would only cite “authorized” texts. By the way, that’s one of the reasons why I always quote everything in Latin and Greek – not to let them say that I am *shestovizing*.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Conocer bien el español, recuperar la fe católica, guerrear contra los moros o contra el turco, olvidar la historia de Europa entre los años de 1602 y de 1918, ser Miguel de Cervantes. Pierre Menard estudió ese procedimiento ... pero lo descartó por fácil.

⁶⁸ Nikolai Berdyaev asserted in his 1938 *Christianity and Antisemitism* that the Western European Jews were ready “to embrace Christ.”

⁶⁹ Both were married to Christian women: a Catholic (Fondane) and a Russian Orthodox (Shestov).

⁷⁰ Fondane, “Conversations with Lev Shestov” [October 4, 1935].

To browse ancient authors for a phrase or passage and to twist them in many ways to serve his own purpose was Shestov's major 'philosophical' device. Following in his teacher's footsteps, Fondane often used the same technique.⁷¹ Borges did not miss this point – not in 1929 and certainly not in 1936.

XVII. Pinning the Knight

Shestov's works may indeed serve as a "diagram of Menard's mental history." But which of them may support Menard's claim that his undertaking to rewrite *Don Quixote* was inspired by "one of those parasitic books that places Christ on a boulevard, Hamlet on the Canebière and Don Quixote on Wall Street"^{72?}

To answer, let us examine Shestov's debut essay *Shakespeare and his critic Brandes* (1898). Written in Russian and never translated into any European language, it was hardly accessible to Borges. But the edgy title, mentioned first in the list of Shestov's publications at the beginning of one English translation of another book,⁷³ might have aroused the Argentine's curiosity. And so, who was Brandes?

Georg Brandes (1842-1927), a notable Jewish-Danish critic and scholar, informed Europe of Kierkegaard (1877), Nietzsche (1887) and Ibsen (1899). After spending half a year in Russia in 1887, he described its history, geography, economic conditions, and a score of its most famous characters, from tsars to writers, in his *Impressions of Russia* (1888). The first comprehensive description of Russia after

⁷¹ Salazar-Ferrer, "Rachel Bepaloff and Nostalgia for the Instant", 2006, 253-255.

⁷² (Otro es uno de esos libros parasitarios que sitúan a Cristo en un bulevar, a Hamlet en la Cannebière o a don Quijote en Wall Street.) Cannebière is the street in the Old Port of Marseille.

⁷³ Leo Shestov, *All Things Are Possible* with the Foreword by D.H. Lawrence (London, 1920); see <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/57369/57369-h/57369-h.htm>

Marquis de Custine's scandalous *La Russie en 1839*, it had to create a stir in the Russian intellectual circles. Shestov, who in the 1890s worked on his doctoral thesis on Russian workers' economic conditions, could not miss it. One can smell here a genesis of Shestov's own erudition as well as the reason for his ire at Brandes. No man is ready to acknowledge his debts to a living contemporary!

The most prominent work by Brandes is a three-volume critical study of William Shakespeare (1897-98). In the first two opening paragraphs, Brandes compares Shakespeare to two other Renaissance artists: Michelangelo and Cervantes, entertaining the reader with the fact that Shakespeare was born the same day Michelangelo died and died on the same day as Cervantes died:

Death overtook Shakespeare in his native place on the same date on which Cervantes died in Madrid. The two great creative artists of the Spanish and the English Renaissance, the men to whom we owe Don Quixote and Hamlet, Sancho Panza and Falstaff, were simultaneously snatched away.⁷⁴

This passage enraged Shestov who saw these rather arbitrary juxtapositions as cheap tricks to attract the reader's attention. Shestov describes Brandes' work as superficial, inferior to a similar study by another literary critic, Hippolyte Taine (1828-93), and even brands Brandes as a "reading loafer" [*lesenden Müssiggänger*].

Borges could not read Shestov's debut essay, though he certainly could access Brandes' work. Borges may have glanced at the first and the last pages only and closed the volume. But feeling Shestov's ire at Brandes in the very title of his opus, the Argentine transfigured it in Menard's mind into a "parasitic book" that juggles great names too flippantly.

⁷⁴ Georg Brandes, *William Shakespeare*, 1905, 1.

As a matter of fact, Brandes' aim was quite noble: he aspired to defend William Shakespeare's authorship of his works and refute then emerging popular theories that ascribed all Shakespearean writings to various outstanding personalities of the Elizabethan era, the bard's contemporaries. After a 1000-page study of the entire corpus of Shakespearean works, Brandes concludes:

It is the author's opinion that, given the possession of forty-five important works by any man, it is entirely our own fault if we know nothing whatever about him. The poet has incorporated his whole individuality in these writings, and there, if we can read aright, we shall find him.⁷⁵

Brandes and *his critic* Shestov chose to delve into Shakespeare; Pierre Menard – understandably, in Borges' view – into Cervantes.

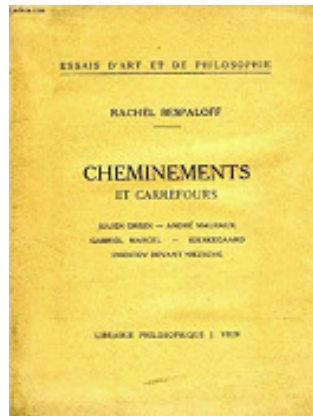
XVIII. A Triple Fork

With the Shestov-Fondane tandem unfolding the identity of *Pierre Menard*, all the hitherto camouflaged characters of the opus can be easily identified as well. The literary foe of the Baroness de Bacourt, a certain “Madame Henri Bachelier,” can be deciphered as Rachel Bepaloff, a Jewish-Ukrainian writer, once a devoted disciple of Shestov. In early 1942, she fled Vichy's France for the USA where she worked first as a scriptwriter for the French Section of the Office of War Information and later taught French in Mount Holyoke College until her suicide in 1949.

In Fondane's recollections about his meetings with Shestov, Rachel Bepaloff is invariably referred to as “Madame Bepaloff.”

⁷⁵ Ibid, 689. The Danish original has 1001 pages (“thousand and one pages”), while the English translation has only 690; see <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/50724/pg50724-images.html>

At the beginning of 1938, Rachel Bepaloff authored *Cheminements et carrefours* (*Paths and Crossroads*), a book on five contemporary philosophers: Julien Green, André Malraux, Gabriel Marcel, Søren Kierkegaard, and Lev Shestov. At this point, Bepaloff began resisting Shestov's irrationalism: defending Science against his attacks, she argued that it was *existence* rather than *knowledge* that was marred by "the original sin." Disagreeing in principle, she still acknowledged that Shestov taught her "a lesson in philosophical anxiety and uncertainty," describing "the torment of doubt as a means of sharpening one's thinking."⁷⁶



Rachel Bepaloff, *Cheminements et carrefours* (Paris, 1938)

Bepaloff's handwritten dedication on the copy addressed to Shestov says:

"You must be asking yourself: 'Why has she dedicated this volume to me if she didn't want to or couldn't hear me?' But what is a Master if not someone who teaches us to think, even against his ideas, and who reveals to us our own potential and our limitations?"⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Rachel Bepaloff, *Cheminements et carrefours*, 2004, 159, 143.

⁷⁷ Salazar-Ferrer, "Rachel Bepaloff and Nostalgia for the Instant", 2006, 253.

In the 1930s Bleriot monoplanes, piloted by Saint-Exupéry and his colleagues, reliably and quickly delivered mail across the Atlantic. Published in Paris on January 1, 1938, Besseloff's book could have reached Buenos Aires within a few weeks, if not days. Its title – *Paths and Crossroads* – may have inspired three years later the title of Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths*.

True to the main idea of *Pierre Menard*, that of doubling the characters, "Madame Henri Bachelier" is a play on the names of Rachel Besseloff and someone else.

Gaston Bachelard, French philosopher of science and prolific writer in the 1930s, is remembered by his idea of "epistemological break" that thirty years later received its second life in Thomas Kuhn's more famous "paradigm shift."

Fondane was deeply interested in Bachelard. Between 1932 and 1940, our poet wrote reviews on eight of his books, including *Intuition of the Instant* (1932), *Atomistic Intuitions: Attempt at Classification* (1933), *New Scientific Mind* (1934), *Dialectics of Duration* (1936), *Experience of Space in Contemporary Physics* (1937), *Formation of the Scientific Mind: Contribution to Psychoanalysis of Objective Knowledge* (1938), *Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1938), and *Philosophy of No: A Philosophy of New Scientific Mind* (1940). In occupied Paris, in 1942, he listened, taking some obvious precautions, to Bachelard's lectures at the Sorbonne.

Bachelard attacked Bergson, claiming Einstein's theory of relativity disproved Bergson's view of Time as duration, while supported objectivity of the instant.⁷⁸

Borges was passionately interested in the notion of Time, offering his own

⁷⁸ Bachelard 2013, 16-17.

“refutation” of Bergsonian Time in the work published in 1947 where he mentioned Bergson by name, though in passing, not mentioning Bachelard at all.⁷⁹

Yet, similarly to Bachelard, Borges also denies the existence of “one single time” – the idea which is already present in *The Secret Miracle*, where time in Hladik’s head and time outside run differently. Gaston Bachelard could be another “dark secret” of Borges – someone he learned from but never referred to. It is my conjecture that Borges, aware of the popularity of Bachelard and Bergson in Shestov-Fondane’s circle, immortalized both in the name of “Henri Bachelier.”

XIX. Pattern Recognition

The same pattern – the merging of two individuals from Shestov-Fondane’s literary circle – helps to uncover several other characters in *Pierre Menard*.

The “surrealist leaflets of Jacques Reboul,” where Menard published his “invective against Paul Valéry,” targets *Les Cahiers du Sud*, or *Southern Notebooks*, a literary magazine founded in Marseille by Jean Ballard. It is in this periodical that Fondane used to publish his essays from 1932 until his arrest in 1944. Jean Ballard had the courage to publish Fondane’s essays even in war time – understandably, under different pseudonyms – providing the hunted poet with means to survive. However, “Jacques Reboul” sounds like an admixture of two names: Jean Ballard and Theodule Ribot, the founder of the *Revue Philosophique*, where Shestov published his works in the 1930s. Borges again mixed two names – one from Fondane’s, another from Shestov’s side – the central ploy of *Pierre Menard*.

⁷⁹ In “New Refutation of Time”, which he commenced in 1944.

Taking Shestov's obituaries as a guide, "Luc Durtain" with whom Menard had literary altercations is a mix of Nikolai Berdyaev, a friend and frequent opponent of Shestov, and Edmund Husserl, a philosopher of Freiburg (a German university city at the Swiss border), Shestov's mentor in phenomenology.

According to Mandelstamm's obituary in *Sur*,

Berdyaev emphasized in his writings the presence of many qualities [in Shestov] but made serious reservations about the merits of his thought. The recent polemic that Shestov had to maintain against Berdyaev, in the Russian newspapers, shows with absolute clarity the essential divergence between both tendencies. Shestov's idealistic adversaries were sometimes led, in spite of themselves perhaps, to ask if that 'anarchist' and 'nihilist' thinker had the right to be called "religious philosopher" or even just a 'philosopher.'

Berdyaev was a well established Russian émigré philosopher and frequent visitor of the Shestov's home. Shestov's wife complained: "Every time Berdyaev visits there are horrible debates. They both get all red in the face. And it's been like that for the last 30 years."⁸⁰

The end of the anonymous obituary in *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* describes tumultuous relations between Shestov and Husserl:

A disciple (by being in opposition) to the late German philosopher Husserl, Chestov dedicated to his death the last article he had an opportunity to write, which would appear shortly in the *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* where Léon Chestov was for many years a faithful collaborator.

And here is Fondane's story:

⁸⁰ Fondane, "Conversations with Lev Shestov." [October 4, 1935].

Shestov visited Husserl in Freiburg in 1928... They spent all night talking and continued into the next day without pause. Husserl's wife used to say: "They are like two lovers – inseparable." Some American philosophers came to see him. Husserl says to them: "Allow me to introduce Mr. Shestov. This is the man who dared to write the most violent critique ever made against me – and that's the reason for our friendship."⁸¹

True, Borges could read Fondane's memoirs only in 1946, after they appeared in *Sur*, but these stories most probably circulated within Victoria Ocampo's circle after her visit of Shestov in 1928 and Fondane's visit to Buenos Aires in 1929.

XX. Pinning the Bishop

In a convoluted footnote to the catalogue of Menard's works, Borges-2 remarks:

Madame Henri Bachelier also lists Quevedo's literal translation of a literal translation of the *Introduction à la vie dévote* of St. Francis of Sales. In Pierre Menard's library there are no traces of such a work. She must have misunderstood a remark of his which he had intended as a joke.⁸²

This somewhat awkward Borges' gibe again points to Shestov: St Francis de Sales was Bishop of Geneva whereas Shestov spent several years, 1910-1914, at the Villa des Saules in the village Coppet on the bank of Lake Geneva.

A reference to Geneva is not accidental. Shestov might have crossed paths with young Borges in Geneva in June-July of 1914 just before leaving for Russia in the

⁸¹ Fondane, "Conversations with Lev Shestov." [December 21, 1935].

⁸² Madame Henri Bachelier enumera asimismo una versión literal de la versión literal que hizo Quevedo de la *Introduction à la vie dévote* de San Francisco de Sales. En la biblioteca de Pierre Menard no hay rastros de tal obra. Debe tratarse de una broma de nuestro amigo, mal escuchada.

last pre-war days. They barely missed meeting face to face in 1920 when Shestov, escaping the Bolshevik Russia, returned to Geneva, while Borges' family left it for Spain a year earlier. When Borges' family visited Geneva again in the fall of 1923, the Shestovs had already moved to Paris two years earlier. Here are Bespaloff's 'crossroads' vs. Borges' "forking paths" winding through Voltaire's 'garden.'

There is more to Geneva. "Menard, a contemporary of William James" sounds like a direct reference to the opening words of Shestov's essay *Logic of Religious Life* (1912): "One of the most enigmatic contemporaries of ours, William James, died," whereas Cervantes/Menard's "Truth, whose mother is history" echoes "A fact is what is useful for mankind" – a sentiment that Shestov ascribed to James.

Since the *Logic of Religious Life* was published in Russian, as were all Shestov's early books, and was not translated into French until the 1950s, let me hypothesize how Borges could get a taste of it. He could have borrowed the book from the Geneva public library and asked his Russian-born friend Maurice Abramovich to translate. Not much – just the first paragraph. A Russian philosopher and a writer on Dostoevsky might have intrigued a young Borges. In 1917, Borges was sympathetic to, and even inspired by, the Russian Revolution.⁸³ Borges may even have aspired to learn Russian – alas! – it is too late to ask.

XXI. Overloaded Piece

But what about the two "literal translations"? And who is "Quevedo"?

⁸³ Boldy, *A Companion to Jorge Luis Borges*, 2013, 19.

Only one work by Shestov was translated into Spanish before 1939. *The Revelations of Death*, published first in French in Paris in 1923 as *Les Révélations de la mort*, appeared in Buenos Aires in 1938 as *Las Revelaciones de la Muerte*. The publisher *Sur* did not indicate the name of the Spanish translator, only noting that the book was translated from French. But we can continue to play Sherlock Holmes.

“Quevedo’s literal translation of a literal translation” must be a reference to the works of *two* individuals at once: a translator from Russian to French and a translator from French to Spanish, described as ‘Quevedo.’ The former is Boris de Schloezer (1881-1969), Shestov’s close friend, who created strikingly accurate (i.e., ‘literal’) translations of Shestov’s works into French. But who is the latter? Most likely, it is the same person who translated other books for *Sur* from French.

One such book reached my hands: Andre Malraux’s novella *La Condition Humana* published by *Sur* only two years earlier, in 1936. It carries the translator’s name: César A. Comet, a semi-forgotten Spanish ultraist poet and a translator from French. Though Spanish Wikipedia knows the place and year of Comet’s birth, Linares in Jaén, 1890, the place and year of his death are blank. In the modern literature his name appears only as one of the crowd – an extra in the Spanish avant-garde landscape. And so here is a chance to bring him to the limelight.

César Alvarez Comet was one of the first ten signatories of the “Ultraist Manifesto” in 1918 and regularly collaborated in all early Spanish avant-garde magazines, such as *Los Quijotes* (1915-18), *Cervantes* (1916-20), *Grecia* (1918-20), *Cosmopolis* (1919-22), *Ultra* (1921-22), *Tobogán* (1924), then *Plural* (1925), of which he was the editor, and finally *La Gaceta Literaria* (1927-32). He earned his living as a post

office employee. Some friends remembered him as “an elephant-like and very sad man who lisped and had swollen ankles.”⁸⁴

Borges met Comet when Borges’ family toured Spain from January 1920 to March 1921, visiting Barcelona, Majorca, Seville and Madrid where young Georgie got acquainted with ultraists. “Quevedos” in Spanish means *pince-nez*, and this is what Comet had on his nose. Borges certainly remembered a quite picturesque Comet and could have associated him with the magazine *Cervantes* issued by ultraists from 1916-1920 where Comet published his own verses and translations from French.⁸⁵

Rafael Cansinos-Assens remembered Comet as “blond with blue eyes behind his glasses, taciturn and monosyllabic” who wrote “convoluted Gongoresque verses.”⁸⁶



César Alvarez Comet (1890-?)

An image from his video talk, likely recorded in the 1960s

⁸⁴ «César A. Comet era un hombre elefantiásico y muy triste que hablaba zopas y se le hinchaban los tobillos»; Florido 1989: 111.

⁸⁵ Comet, César. “Una época de arte puro”, en *Cervantes*, abril 1919, págs. 86 y sigs. “El Movimiento dada.” *Extractos del Boletín dada*, núm. 6. Traducido por César A. Comet, en: *Cervantes*, julio 1920, págs. 93-97. See Videla, *El Ultraismo*, 1963: bibliography.

⁸⁶ 'rubio y de ojos azules tras los lentes, taciturno y monosilábico', autor de 'versos enrevesados y gongorinos'.

Gongorism is a literary style characterized by learned obscurity and the use of various ornate devices. Hence a poignant, purely Borgesian, touch: Quevedo and Gongora, two great Spanish poets of the 17th century, were bitter rivals, their rivalry played an important role in shaping Borges' story *The Aleph* (1945).⁸⁷ And so we discovered inter alia which early passage inspired this later story.⁸⁸

XXII. Advanced Pawn

Chess allusions are sprinkled around in *The Garden of Forking Paths*. Pierre Menard composed a treatise on chess where he promoted the idea of “reformed chess” – eliminating one of the two rooks’ pawns; in his mind, this change could allow for “greater creativity.” Jaromir Hladík, in his dream on the night of the German occupation of Prague, was haunted by “the clangor of chess clocks.”

Both Shestov and Fondane may have played chess, as the game was popular in Paris in the 1920s-1930s, especially in the Russian Diaspora. One can imagine Shestov playing chess with his house guests, Jules de Gaultier, Lévy-Bruhl, or Nikolai Berdyaev.⁸⁹ Paris was home to Alexander Alekhine, Russian émigré and the world chess champion. To reach the summit of the chess Olympus, Alekhine defeated Cuban Jose Raul Capablanca in 1927 in Buenos Aires. Their match was a major cultural event in South America in the 1920s, and Ocampo's circle almost certainly

⁸⁷ Kluge, “The World in a Poem?”, 2005.

⁸⁸ Besides, we might have learned what Borges meant by “translation in the style of Quevedo” – a snicker from his “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1940) – which led many unsuspecting critics astray, back to the 17th century; see, e.g., Irwin 1994: 130-1.

⁸⁹ In the *In Praise of Stupidity* (Russian: «Похвала Глупости», 1907) devoted to an analysis of Berdyaev's works, Shestov brings as an example of stupidity an anecdote about two women, who removed the kings from the chess board but continued to play.

attended it. Pierre Menard must play chess: the French and Spanish spelled Shestov's name as 'Chestov.' And Borges read English since childhood.

Returning home in 1936, after his failure to make a film, and penning verses over the Atlantic, Fondane felt undefeated:

Calme le jeu d'échecs se poursuit, un pion avance.

[Calmly the game of chess continues; a pawn advances.]⁹⁰

In the last week of August 1939, Buenos Aires hosted the 8th Chess Olympiad, with 27 national teams competing and Capablanca and Alekhine playing for their respective teams, Cuba and France. The Second World War marred the event; more than twenty players, both Jewish and non-Jewish, who represented various European countries, asked Argentina for political asylum.

At the chess Olympiads, each national team consists of four players; all teams play at the same time in the same room. In all probability, Borges was present at the celebrity event for at least one day. This is where he may have heard "the clangor of chess clocks" that haunted Hladík on the eve of the Nazi occupation of Prague in March 1939?

XXIII. Recapture

In 1940, Borges again parodies Shestov's legacy and the Shestov-Fondane relationship in the story *Circular Ruins*, which first appeared in the December issue of *Sur* and then in *The Garden of Forking Paths* right after *Pierre Menard*.⁹¹

⁹⁰ *Titanic* (1937). (I owe this reference to Eric Freedman).

The story is somewhat mystical. After many futile attempts to find followers, the Master, a newcomer from a distant land and a priest of unknown religion, finally created a disciple in a dream. In the end, when a fire came to devour them but left both unscathed, the Master appeared to be a phantom as well – a dream of someone else.

Did Borges view Shestov as a derivative of someone else? If so, of whom – Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl? True, Shestov himself was bothered by a visible lack of originality in his own writings:

One day Berdyaev was telling me about originality of thought ... I went home and for the first time in my life I asked myself: “Am I original?” As I analyzed myself, I kept thinking: “This you took from Dostoevsky, this – from Shakespeare (a lot), this comes from the Old Testament, etc. All I said has been said by others before – therefore I am not original!” But the question of originality itself has always seemed to me, not just secondary, but of no importance. What matters is to say what must be said, to search what one must search for.⁹²

In hindsight, Borges has misfired regarding the Master. The reason likely lies in Borges’ illness, when recovery adds a hilarious hue to everything around. He certainly read Mandelstamm’s necrology in *Sur* in an ironic light: the idea that “intelligence and reason are synonyms of the original sin” could not appeal to him.

Borges was even less kind to Fondane, attaching him to Shestov in the role of Sancho Panza.⁹³ Judging from their encounters in 1929 and 1936, Borges sensed

⁹¹ Borges, *Ficciones*, 1993, 39-44.

⁹² Fondane, “Conversations with Lev Shestov” [December 14, 1935].

⁹³ And this is the view of some of our contemporaries; see Hyde, “Lev Šestov’s French Apologist Benjamin Fondane,” 1970.

that Fondane's aggressiveness toward his peers concealed an inability to create something original. In philosophy, Fondane reiterated his master's ideas. In poetry, he only cried for help, like the Biblical Job, like Jaromir Hladík. This was not enough to capture the Argentine's imagination in the 1930s even if the lines were penned by a Frenchman. A writer either had to be glued to the bed by illness like Marcel Proust, fly over the Atlantic like Saint-Exupéry, fight in the Spanish Civil War as did André Malraux, or, at the very least, develop a passion for cheese like Sartre.⁹⁴ Fondane appeared healthy, was married, and in no way a gourmet or adventurer. However, the war changed the optics and Borges himself.

XXIV. Adjournment

Borges might have known about Fondane's last days in France, in the shadow of Auschwitz. After issuing a series of anti-Jewish laws in the spring of 1942, the Germans, with the full assistance of French authorities, in July of that year began mass deportations of foreign-born Jews "to the East." Worrying about Fondane's fate, in October 1942 Victoria Ocampo and the Aguilar brothers tried to get their friend out of France. There are conflicting accounts of their failure. A version tells that Fondane refused to accept an exit visa and abandon his sister Lina who, as a non-citizen, was under an imminent threat of deportation. Mimicking his own play, *Philoctète*, he was caught between death and duty. According to another version, the Argentine Embassy failed to locate him since he was in hiding. On learning of his arrest in March 1944 and subsequent detention in Drancy, Ocampo's circle certainly expected the worst.

⁹⁴ *The Jean Paul Sartre Cookbook*, <https://pvspade.com/Sartre/cookbook.html>

Yes, History, “the mother of truth,” turned everything upside down. Sarcasm that was quite innocuous in pre-war days became sinister just several years later when projected over a haunted man. Borges could not admit (and never admitted) in public that he had laughed at a man who defied Nazi orders to wear the yellow star and was gassed in Auschwitz. Yet, Borges could, and did, make amends through his writings – the first step in the process of personal growth.

In *Deutsches Requiem*, published in 1946, he portrayed, under the name of *David Jerusalem*, a heroic image of a Jewish poet murdered by the commandant of the SS concentration camp. Indeed, Fondane, a Romanian Jew, aged 46 in 1944, is fairly recognizable from this description:

Jerusalem was a man of fifty... A man of memorable eyes, sallow skin, and a beard that was almost black, David Jerusalem was the prototypical Sephardic Jew, although he belonged to the depraved and hated Ashkenazim.⁹⁵

Shaving was a daily routine for Borges, almost religiously done.⁹⁶ Fondane, a secular Jew, was always well-shaven. “A beard that was almost black.” Did Borges assume that all inmates in Nazi camps grew beards because they could not shave? Far from Europe and its battles, Borges felt Fondane’s humiliation almost physically.

XXV. A Sealed Move

And here is Fondane’s masterpiece from the 1940s, on the eve of arrest:

⁹⁵ Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories*, 1949; first published in *Sur* in 1946.

⁹⁶ Miguel de Torre Borges, “Jorge Luis Borges: the Day in the Life.” *New Yorker*, April 12, 1993. 90-92. Trans. D.A. Yates.

*Le Mal des fantômes*⁹⁷

When the voyager who escaped from the shipwreck
got at last to the island, having saved from the waves
his toothbrush, his pipe, his troubled liver
and his old inability to believe in miracles,
time suddenly melted like a lump of snow,
silence, suddenly completely cracked,
the voyager's blood became light and drunken,
so light and so drunken
that he entered into things and things entered into him,
in a thirst for combustion so keen
that his sight stumbled among visions,
went through states of unease, hallucinations so strong,
ecstasies and revelations so clear
that he grew afraid of turning into a spider
or into a wild strawberry –
so afraid that he flung himself on his knees,
he prayed to his god too excellent to work miracles,
and let himself fall from a rock into the sea
just one moment before
he might have been granted the gift of prophecy.

⁹⁷ Gascoyne & Fondane, *Varia*.



Plaque in memory of Benjamin Fondane, Rue Rollin 6, Paris

XXVI. Post Mortem

In Pierre Menard, we uncovered the face behind the pen. Or, rather, many faces – a dozen most peculiar characters, mostly Jewish intellectuals, recent refugees from Eastern Europe living in Paris, whom the Argentinean feminist writer Victoria Ocampo befriended in the 1920s, during her annual trips to Europe in the interwar period. Their tumultuous relations were viewed from the other side of the Atlantic with irony if not outright sarcasm. Yet the Second World War turned clowns into heroes. Thinking of them, putting himself in their shoes, Borges matured as a writer and a man. Conceiving Pierre Menard, he could repeat after Valéry:

It is in this that he resembles me, much as a child resembles a father who at the moment of conceiving him was himself undergoing a profound change of being.

This is why *Ficciones* grew head and shoulders above Borges's earlier fantasies of the same genre and became a springboard for his future success.

The writer's arsenal was also enriched with new tools. Creating Pierre Menard, Borges went beyond the traditional roman à clef. True to his youthful ultraist ideology, he attempted to create new characters by fusing pairs of real-life

personalities. One may debate whether in the character of Pierre Menard he achieved a true synthesis or only a superficial amalgamation of Shestov and Fondane. Regardless, Borges preserved for us some precious historical details, which otherwise would be irrevocably lost. If Borges-2 says that he and Pierre Menard discussed a line from *Othello* “Where a malignant and turbaned Turk” – this is what Borges discussed with Fondane at one of their meetings. When Borges-2 casually mentions the “stains on the skin” [la manchas de la piel] as the map of man’s destiny – these are Fondane’s or Shestov’s visible *birthmarks*.

I dare to make an even stronger assertion: several other of Borges’ stories, in *Ficciones* and later, are based on the same two characters: Lev Shestov and Benjamin Fondane. *Three Versions of Judas* (1943) may well be a reflection on Fondane’s opus *Un Nouveau Visage de Dieu: Léon Chestov mystique russe* with Shestov as Nils Runeberg. And does *The Theologians* (1947) present another, later Borges’ reflection on Shestov’s obituaries in the *Revue Philosophique* and *Sur* with Shestov and Husserl or Shestov and Berdyaev as prototypes for the protagonists?

My reading of *Pierre Menard* keeps the window for new discoveries open: deciphering the provenance and prototypes of the minor treatises in the catalogue of Menard’s works may reveal some missing details and characters. The question of Victoria Ocampo’s whereabouts in the spring of 1939 is also open.

Chess is mentioned (though admittedly in a subtle way) by Borges in *Pierre Menard* and *The Secret Miracle* and even in the title story *The Garden of Forking Paths*. In all likelihood, Borges ciphered his works in the style of the famous chess games played in Buenos Aires – notably, the Capablanca - Alekhine 1927 match or the 8th Chess Olympiad in 1939. Too willingly, I walked in his shoes.

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