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Comparing the Effect of Fictional Translation on the Reader’s Perception of Reality in the Works of Cervantes and Borges

Translation is a valuable tool that allows large audiences to understand foreign texts. However, sometimes a translation isn’t a real translation at all, but rather a fictional pretense used as a literary and stylistic tool. In Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* and Borges’s works *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* and *Averroës’s Search*, the pretense of translation is used to alter and distort the reader’s perception of reality. For background on the works, *Don Quixote* tells the fictional story of a delusional, middle-aged man who in the 16th century, decides to become a 12th century knight. Throughout the novel, Cervantes pretends that the story is a translation of various older texts and uses multilingual synonyms to create confusion among the characters in the novel. Cervantes’s use of fictional translation increases the reader’s awareness of the multilayered reality that he creates. In contrast, *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*, is a satirical analysis of a fictional translation of *Don Quixote* by an also fictional author named Pierre Menard. In this text, Borges uses the pretense of translation as a tool to engage readers and make them question their own reality, as what at first seems sensical becomes more and more irrational. Another work in which Borges explores the idea of fictional translation is *Averroës’s Search*, which describes a man viewing three children acting out a theatrical play to which he is unaware of, because no notion of theaters exists in the Islamic world. However, the text gives the reader various clues that they have observed a dramatic play, allowing the reader to make a

cultural translation where Averroës fails. This text differs from *Pierre Menard* in that it pushes the reader’s perception of reality in the opposite direction, from irrational to rational as the narrative progresses. This analysis compares these texts on the basis of Wilfred Bion’s theory of transformation and reality, which includes two components, K and O. K represents knowledge processes that include an element of rationality, whereas a transformation towards O represents movement towards an absolute truth and ultimate reality.1 A transformation towards -K represents a loss of rationality with increased knowledge whereas with a transformation towards +K, things make more sense as more knowledge is gained. Comparing the effects of fictional translation on the reader’s perception of the fictional narrative and reality in the works of Cervantes and Borges, Cervantes’s use of a hybrid language and invariance of storyline allow for a more complete and multilayered interpretation of absolute reality, where Borges’s use of repetitive text and artificial translation strongly disrupts the reader’s perceptions of not only reality but rationality as well, making them question themselves as well their own interpretations of the texts.

The following passage from *Pierre Menard*, where Cervantes’s version of *Don Quixote* is compared to Menard’s supposed translation exemplifies the transformation of the reader’s reality from rational to irrational:

“The latter [Cervantes] for instance, wrote (Don Quixote, Part One, Chapter 9):

“… truth, who is the mother of history, who is the rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future.”

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

“… truth, who is the mother of history, who is the rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future.”

History, *mother* of truth, the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an investigation of reality, but as its origin.”2

Here, Borges makes us read the same passage twice in a row, under the pretense that the fictional translation by Menard is much more creative and intellectual than the original version by Cervantes. He reasons that “there is no intellectual exercise that is not ultimately useless”.2 Through this intellectual exercise, Borges pushes the narrative from what started off as reasonable to completely irrational. By allowing readers to make sense of this nonsense, he causes readers to question themselves, rather than the text, forcing readers to become more aware of how they are reading. We can further examples of this mechanism as *Pierre Menard* progresses because the text continues to use fictional translation to make the narrative more nonsensical, using translation as a tool to distort the reader’s perception of reality as more knowledge is obtained and processed. In this sense, *Pierre Menard* exemplifies a transformation towards -K, in that as the narrative progresses, the reader’s reality moves towards irrationality. In contrast, the opposite transformation, towards +K, occurs in *Averroes’s Search*, in that as the story goes on, the reader is given more to recognize and understand the theatric play, even though the narrator is unable to. *Averroes’s Search* puts the reader as the audience of the children’s theatrical dramatization. Transformation here implies being aware of experiencing the role that a situation creates, rather than simply understanding foreign words. Because some words and phrases have significance culturally beyond their verbal meaning, translation therefore implies this type of transformation. Borges sees translation as a form of understanding, creation, and ultimately interpretation, arguing that translations are transformations, rather than mere

copies of the original.3 By taking us through his intellectual exercise, Borges compels us to view the fictional translation of Menard as an interpretation. According to Borges’s fictional representation of translation, the original *Don Quixote* by Cervantes and its translation by Menard are two versions of the same text, but neither version is guaranteed to be better than the other. If the reader has an open interpretation of the text, some translations can be better than the original because translation can be conceived as an experience that transforms both the text and the reader. This model of translation suggests reading and listening practices that create alternative understandings and interpretations, making it impossible to arrive at an ultimate truth or reality.

In contrast to Borges’s model of translation and interpretation, Cervantes employs translation in an approach that maintains the same meaning, despite differences between translations, thereby allowing the continuity of an absolute reality. In this way, Cervantes’s storyline is invariant. The use of multilingual synonyms is a form of translation that changes words, but contrastingly to Borges, there is no complete shift in meaning; rather, the original and target languages are used simultaneously in a hybrid language. This makes accurate communication more possible between versions and a singular understanding of the story can be approached. Despite the various languages used in the novel, the translations of these texts and languages approach the same meaning and understanding in the context of the storyline. Cervantes’s hybrid theory of translation allows mediation between different languages and contexts. In chapter one of *Don Quixote*, Don Quixote confuses cod for trout due to the multilingual synonyms used by the innkeeper. The story’s background is set with multiple competing languages in the Spain and despite racial tensions against Muslims, translation is inevitable and allows for the use of diverse perspectives simultaneously; for instance, there are at

least three terms for the ‘dried fish,’ depending on the geographical region: “abadexo” in Castille, “baccalao” in Andalusia, and “truchuela” in others.4 The meaning of all these different words converges in a way that everyone understands, even though translation has taken place. While Borges’s use of translation transforms the meaning and rationality of the reader’s reality, Cervantes’s allows for invariances to be maintained. Transformation occurs but the meaning of the translations converges on a singular, invariant definition.

Although Borges and Cervantes both employ fictional translation as a tool to interrupt the narrative and engage the reader, Borges does so in a more disruptive manner than Cervantes. Borges asks readers to challenge their own interpretations of the text, pushing readers further from an absolute conclusion and understanding, whereas Cervantes uses translation to place the reader more as an observer to the narrative, able to see the differences created by translation but still arrive at a shared reality. Paradoxically, Cervantes uses a hybrid language, yet the reader can move towards a final interpretation of the text even if they do not understand some of the words. In contrast, because Borges’s translations change the interpretation of the text: it is impossible to reach a single understanding of the text. In this manner, the works of Borges differs most from Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* in terms of Bion’s categories. *Don Quixote* represents a transformation towards O, an absolute truth. Even though the author pretends to translate various texts, the storyline is invariant, and the translations converge on the same meaning. Even though the multilingual synonyms create confusion to the characters, as a reader, we can make sense of all sides and all versions. This allows the reader to create a more complete understanding of the narrative beyond what any single character in the narrative is capable of. In this way, Cervantes use of a hybrid language allows the reader to see the multilayered reality that he creates. The layers start at Don Quixote himself, who is confused by translation. The rest of the layers include

the story itself, which comprises and contains what both Don Quixote and the innkeeper are saying, the narrator, who is pretending to be translating the story from another text, and the reader themselves, who see through all these layers and understand not only the multilingual synonyms and story, but also the author’s pretense of translation and his use of first person. In contrast, Borges’s fictional translation in *Pierre Menard* aims to alter the meaning of the text and create multiple interpretations, thereby preventing the reader from arriving at a single absolute reality, while *Averroes’s Search* portrays a cultural translation that only the reader, and none of the characters in the story, is attuned to.