Like space abhorring a vacuum, Borges abhors a condition of stasis. For this reason he moves from enstasis (being in himself) to extasis (being elsewhere). As a poet of ecstasy, he is fated to follow the voyage of the seeker, not the finder; to wander, following the original Greek usage of the word ekstasis, “outside himself.”

—Willis Barnstone, “Borges, Poet of Ecstasy”

Jorge Luis Borges inaugurated his writing career at the tender age of nine with the publication of a translation of Oscar Wilde’s “The Happy Prince” in El País, a Buenos Aires newspaper (“Autobiographical Essay” 26]. This early, precocious interest in translating and in English texts, which, as we know, flourished into a life-long attraction to the foreign and to the conundrums of translation, would be an important element in the construction of his literary career, and in the development of some of the major themes that inspired his writing. A prolific translator of texts by such figures as Kafka, Virginia Woolf, Joyce, Faulkner, Poe, Whitman, Hart Crane, Chesterton, Apollinaire, Browne, Papini, Novalis, and Hawthorne, among others, Borges has left us some of the most original and insightful ideas on the implications of translation for literature and on the relationships that are generally established between translators and authors. In “The Homeric Versions” (“Las versiones homéricas”) and “The Translators of the Thousand and One Nights” (“Los traductores de las 1001 noches”), both published in the 1930s, and, more pointedly, in “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” written in 1939, Borges anticipates some of the main tenets of translation studies as the latter have been redefined in the last decade or so under the widespread influence of postmodern textual theories [Arrojo, Oficina 11–22].

Understood as an intrinsically performative textual activity, translation is generally viewed, in Borges’s terms, as a form of rewriting which is not in any sense neutral or secondary to the original. If, in such terms, both the so-called original and the translated text seem to enjoy a similar status, what kind of exchange might there be between the two? And, at the same time, if translators cannot, in any sense, be “invisible” in their translations, and, like authors, at least on some level, do mean what they

1. Whenever possible, I will quote from English-language translations of Borges, adding between parentheses the original Spanish title of each piece.
say, what might it represent, for a translator, at a certain point, to choose a certain text to translate? In order to reflect on such questions posed by Borges’s texts on the role of translation as a form of writing, I will be concentrating on the paradigmatic relationship that may be established between Borges’s interest in Walt Whitman, the publication of his first poem, “Himno del mar,” in 1919, and his versions of Leaves of Grass (Hojas de hierba), which were published about fifty years later. In order to learn about the strongly emotional investment that seems to have underscored Borges’s early attachment to Whitman and his poetry as well as the role played by translation in such a relationship, I will be turning to a Borgesian masterpiece, the story “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” which certainly deserves George Steiner’s often quoted statement: “the most acute, most concentrated commentary anyone has offered on the business of translation” [After Babel 70]. Thus, the exemplary relationship that Pierre Menard establishes with Cervantes and his text, which one might understand as a form of “influence,” “transference,” or simply “love,” will serve as a mirroring map for the complex, productive encounter that took place between Borges and Whitman at the very outset of the first’s literary career, and which would have an impact during most of his life.

Pierre Menard’s “Subterranean” Desire to be Someone Else: A Lesson on Translation and Transference

Among all the solitary, somewhat maniacal characters that inhabit Borges’s fictions and nonfictions, Pierre Menard is the one that best synthesizes the pathos of the typically Borgesian character and his self-imposed, generally unrealizable mission, which often involves a particularly deep interest in a strong precursor and/or a major founding text. His story—as a writer, reader, and translator—is exemplary. Divided between his mediocre “visible” works and the ambitious “invisible” project of rewriting verbatim a few excerpts from Cervantes’s Don Quixote—“the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of part I [. . .] and a fragment of chapter XXII” [90]—Menard “dedicated his scruples and his nights ‘lit by midnight oil’ to repeating in a foreign tongue a book that already existed” [95]. In order to achieve his “astonishing” goal, involving “perhaps the most significant writing of our time” [90], Menard devised a “method” that “was to be relatively simple”: “learn Spanish, return to Catholicism, fight against the Moor or Turk, forget the history of Europe from 1602 to 1918—be Miguel de Cervantes” [91]. However, this initial plan was “discarded” on the grounds that it was “too easy.” Besides, “of all the impossible ways of bringing it about, this was the least interesting”: “to be a popular novelist of the seventeenth century in the twentieth seemed to Menard to be a diminution. Being, somehow, Cervantes and arriving thereby at the Quixote—that looked to Menard less challenging (and therefore less interesting) than continuing to be Pierre Menard and coming to the Quixote through the experiences of Pierre Menard” [91].

Menard’s “methods” for reproducing Don Quixote, which seem absurd in Borges’s story, could be viewed as an ironical criticism of the call for faithfulness and invisibility typically associated with traditional translation theories and practices. The story is in fact a brilliant illustration of how absurd it is for a translator to claim (or even to try) to be absolutely faithful to someone else’s text. What is not made explicit, however, in Borges’s plot is the reason, the motivation for Menard’s choice: “Why the Quixote? My reader may ask. That choice, made by a Spaniard, would not have been incomprehensible, but it no doubt is so when made by a Symboliste from Nîmes, a devotee essentially of Poe” [92]. Furthermore, as we learn from Menard himself, even though the
Quixote “deeply” interested him, it did not seem to him “inevitable”: “I cannot imagine the universe without Poe’s ejaculation ‘Ah, bear in mind this garden was enchanted!’ or the Bateau ivre or the Ancient Mariner, but I know myself able to imagine it without the Quixote. [. . .] The Quixote is a contingent work; the Quixote is not necessary” [92]. How could we explain, for example, that in spite of his alleged indifference toward the Spanish writer, Menard assumed “the mysterious obligation to reconstruct, word for word, the novel that for [Cervantes] was spontaneous” [92–93]? And how could we explain, above all, that Pierre Menard was defined precisely by his “invisible” work as a “novelist,” and not by the “visible” pieces that he actually wrote, and which Borges’s narrator has carefully listed for us [90]?

This intriguing association between Menard’s “subterranean” efforts and his apparent indifference to that which occupied his “scruples and his nights” almost begs a psychoanalytically oriented explanation. His “invisible,” “subterranean” work could very well be associated with the unconscious and its production. Therefore, one might claim that in spite of his conscious efforts, that is, in spite of the texts that he actually wrote and divulged as his own, what truly occupied Menard’s inner world was the attraction to someone else’s work and the desire to possess it. Considering that Menard was so enamored of Cervantes’s text that he actually dedicated his life to rewriting it, one might argue that Borges’s story somehow anticipates Harold Bloom’s widely discussed reflection on reading, writing, and influence. To the extent that it proposes that “influence,” at least in its initial stages, cannot be distinguished from what we call “love” [Map of Misreading 12], Bloom’s theory might shed some light on Menard’s interest in the Quixote. Appropriately, in one of Bloom’s statements on the complexities of this peculiar brand of love affair (“if we have been ravished by a poem, it will cost us our own poem” [18]), which brings readers and writers both together and apart, we can find echoes of Borges himself. I refer, for example, to the note addressed to the reader in the opening of his first collection of poems, Fervor de Buenos Aires (Adoration of Buenos Aires), published in 1923: “if the pages of this book happen to contain any apt line, may the reader forgive me the discourtesy of having stolen it from you. [. . .] The circumstances which make you the reader of these exercises and me their writer are trivial and fortuitous” [Obra poética 22; my translation].

2. Especially after Lawrence Venuti’s theorization on the translator’s (in)visibility, it is appropriate to add that I am not exactly adopting his usage of the visibility/invisibility opposition here. Rather, I will be trying to explore the well-knit cluster of associations Borges’s story seems to allow in relation to such opposition. Thus, while Menard’s “visible” body of work comprises the texts he actually wrote and left behind, his “invisible” accomplishment could be related not only to his “subterranean” life (and, thus, to his unconscious desire, and, of course, to what had to be kept secret even from himself), but also to the simple fact that he left no written evidence of his reproduction of the Quixote. Moreover, the “visible/invisible” opposition could also refer to what is actually possible/impossible and therefore establish some limits between desire and actual achievement. However, in a Borgesian fashion, it would certainly be possible to find echoes of Venuti’s theorization in Menard’s quest for recognition as a translator (or as an “invisible” author) of the Quixote.

3. Daniel Balderston has also related Borges’s thoughts on influence to Bloom’s work. Without elaborating on it, he even speculates that “Pierre Menard” might have been one of the American critic’s “subterranean” “inspirations” for the construction of his own theory of influence [Precursor velado 170]. As he points out, however, Bloom does quote a couple of lines from Borges’s “Kafka and His Precursors” at the beginning of The Anxiety of Influence [19]. Furthermore, in a later text, Bloom recognizes Borges as “a great theorist of poetic influence” [Jorge Luis Borges 2].

4. Again, it is possible to find similarities between Borges’s statement and Bloom’s definition of influence anxiety: “the anxiety of influence is an anxiety in expectation of being flooded. [. . .]
pointed out before, in Borges’s works one often finds an acute interest in this special, productive, yet ambivalent emotional encounter between readers, writers, and their texts. However, as the second part of Borges’s early note illustrates (and as I will try to elaborate later on), he often seems to be interested in neutralizing, or in playing down, the underlying conflict and the aggressive feelings related to rivalry, which are inherent in the notion of reading as a sui generis, “dangerous” activity that causes readers to risk “losing” the texts they might wish to write.

The complexities of the emotional bond that some readers establish with some texts is in fact one of the main issues at stake in “Pierre Menard,” and, to a certain extent, in Don Quixote as well. It might be argued, for instance, that Pierre Menard not only was interested in the repetition of Cervantes’s text, but was, himself, a repetition of the Quixote as a character who, as we know, became so absorbed in chivalry books that “the lack of sleep and the excess of reading withered his brain, and he went mad” [26–27]. Thus, driven by his obsessive love for books and by his desire to make reality conform to the stories that he had read, Don Quixote tried to abandon his uneventful, dull life as a modest hidalgo, and ended up transforming himself into a pathetic version of his favorite character, a knight in the manner of Amadís de Gaula—himself a repetition of, among others, Tirante el Blanco, Olivante de Laura, the Italian Orlando Furioso, and, of course, Lancelot and the Knights of the Round Table.

One might also try to understand the mechanisms of this kind of attachment with the aid of Jacques Lacan’s conception of “transference,” which he defined as a form of love: “I deemed it necessary to support the idea of transference, as indistinguishable from love, with the formula of the subject presumed to know. [. . .] The person in whom I presume knowledge to exist thereby acquires my love.” In other words, transference is “love directed toward, addressed to, knowledge” [Le séminaire 64; Felman 86]. “Knowledge,” here (and particularly in the special kind of relationship that is established between readers and authors or their texts), may be understood as that which the Other (either as the Text or its Author) possesses as the sign that gives Him/Her/It the power to seduce readers. From such a perspective, we might say that Cervantes is clearly “the subject presumed to know” in Borges’s story, and, in spite of Menard’s resistance to acknowledge the depth of his attraction to the Spanish master, what he actually desired, as he himself declared, was not merely to repeat Cervantes’s work but, rather, to be Cervantes, that is, to possess that which distinguishes the author of the Quixote (and the father of the modern novel) as one of the greatest, most influential literary figures of all time. And, as we take into account that transference involves apparently antagonistic feelings, bringing together admiration and aggression, homage

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The ephebe who fears his precursors as he might fear a flood is taking a vital part for a whole, the whole being everything that constitutes his creative anxiety, the spectral blocking agent in every poet. [. . .] Every good reader properly desires to drown, but if the poet drowns, he will become only a reader” [Map of Misreading 57].

5. Yet, in texts such as “Death and the Compass” and “The Translators of the Thousand and One Nights,” the struggle that takes place between readers and writers for the authorial power to establish meaning is made quite clear. In the first, even though Red Scharlach (as an authorial figure) and Erik Lonnrot (the reader as detective) are practically doubles, it is the Author who manages to trap the Reader in a deadly labyrinth/text [see Arrojo, “Writing”]. A similar kind of struggle can be found in “The Translators of the Thousand and One Nights,” in which we learn, for example, that “one of the secret aims” of Richard Burton’s work was “the annihilation of another gentleman [. . .] who was compiling a vast dictionary in England and who died long before he was annihilated by Burton. That gentleman was Edward Lane [. . .] that had supplanted a version by Galland. Lane translated against Galland, Burton against Lane; to understand Burton we must understand this hostile dynasty” [92].
and rivalry, we could further understand why Menard’s project of replacing Cervantes had to be kept invisible.

For the Quixotic Menard, becoming Cervantes, or taking his authorial place, would also entail having the kind of romanticized, heroic life he allegedly had: living in Spain, “the land of Carmen,” in the seventeenth century, “that saw the Battle of Lepanto and the plays of Lope de Vega” [93], fighting the Moor or the Turk, and, thus, having the opportunity of being both a successful “man of action” and an accomplished “man of letters.” Most of all, for Menard, being the author of the Quixote would allow him to escape his geography, his age, his surroundings, his native language, and, of course, himself and his petty bourgeois life as a minor writer and obscure scholar. Moreover, as Menard discarded the first “method” he had devised to arrive at Don Quixote, that is, as he abandoned his project to become Cervantes and decided to continue being Menard and to come to the Quixote anyway, he also “managed” to take over Cervantes’s privileged position and to eliminate him from the actual text of the Quixote. As we learn, it was Menard’s “conviction” that it was more “interesting” to come to the Quixote “through the experiences of Pierre Menard” that “obliged him to leave out the autobiographical foreword to Part II of the novel.” As Borges’s narrator explains, “including the prologue would have meant creating another character—‘Cervantes’—and also presenting the Quixote through that character’s eyes, not Pierre Menard’s. Menard, of course, spurned that easy solution” [91].

The specificity of Borges’s text as a story about translation and transference, or translation as transference, or, even, translation as a response to influence (here understood as that special power exerted by “the subject presumed to know” over those he/she seduces) lies in the fact that it tells us of a reader who does not merely try to write his own text after being influenced by another, but who actually sets out to occupy the privileged authorial position of his seducer and to repeat the latter’s exact same text. In fact, from the perspective of a conception of translation informed by psychoanalysis, which would tend to regard anybody “who devotes great time and effort to conveying someone else’s words” as “operating with a strong identification, already wishing to operate as a double” [Gallop 66], Menard would be an exemplary translator figure. Furthermore, to the extent that the process of translation literally involves the repression of the original and its replacement with an allegedly exact replica in another language [Forrester 373n5], it seems to constitute the perfect scenario for such a transferential plot. At the same time, to the extent that this “replacement” involves the actual writing of a text that is expected to be the same as the original, but which always turns out to be irremediably different, as it inevitably reflects the translator’s own writing and inter-

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6. Appropriately, one of the excerpts from the Quixote that Menard tried to rewrite was chapter 38 of part 1, which deals precisely with the opposition between “arms” and “letters” in Don Quixote’s famous speech about these two ways of interfering with reality. As we try to understand what Menard could be “saying” behind the literal surface of his interest in reproducing Cervantes’s chapter, we might speculate that, like the Quixote, who abandons his books in search of a more effective way of interfering with reality, Menard is also trying to leave behind his mediocre, visible works, and attempts to become the author of one of the best-known texts of all times. Furthermore, like the Quixote, who makes it clear that what interests him is the possibility of becoming “eminent,” Menard, in his reproduction of the “same” speech, might also be telling us of his desire to be famous and influential. For a detailed reading of the chapters that Menard tried (or might have tried) to reproduce, see Arrojo, Tradução 163–70.

7. This notion of translation as transference (or as a form of possessive love) is aptly described, for instance, by the Brazilian poet/translator Augusto de Campos as he defines his own practice: “my way of loving [my favorite poets] is translating them. Or cannibalizing them, according to Osvald de Andrade’s Anthropophagic Law. I am interested only in what I don’t have” [7; my translation from the Portuguese].
pretation, translation necessarily deconstructs traditional notions related to authorship and meaning production. Similarly, as it has been pointed out before, it was Menard’s invisible efforts at becoming or replacing Cervantes that defined him as a “novelist,” rather than his actual “visible” oeuvre. In other words, it was through translation, that is, through the repetition “in a foreign tongue of a book that already existed” that Menard managed to respond to influence and, thus, to act out his desire to be someone else and to possess that which he “did not have,” and which he associated with the “subject presumed to know” represented by Cervantes. Appropriately, the mechanism of this “acting out”—or this therapeutic fantasy—is made even more efficient with the significant repression of the words “translation” or “translator”—never mentioned in connection with Menard’s efforts regarding the Quixote. Instead, we are told, for instance, that Menard “did not want to compose another Quixote [. . .]—he wanted to compose the Quixote. Nor surely, need one be obliged to note that his goal was never a mechanical transcription of the original; he had no intention of copying it. His admirable ambition was to produce a number of pages which coincided—word for word and line by line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes” [91]. At the same time, as he invisibly attempted to arrive at the Quixote, and, thus, as he secretly tried to take over Cervantes’s authorial position, Menard, the translator, also covered up the violence of his transferential desire with the alibi of absolute faithfulness. After all, Borges’s text could also be read as a story about the ambivalence of fidelity. As one might claim, at the same time that he was interested in replacing Cervantes, no translator ever tried harder than Menard to be so absolutely faithful both to his original and to his author. In fact, it might even be argued that it was also in the name of fidelity that he dedicated his efforts to the Quixote. As we are informed, “those who have insinuated that Menard devoted his life to writing a contemporary Quixote besmirch his illustrious memory” [91].

8. It is appropriate to add that chapter 9, the first one Menard tried to reproduce from Cervantes’s novel, is precisely about the rather nebulous origin of Don Quixote and, thus, the blurred limits between translation and authorship, the “original” and the translation. The text of Don Quixote, as we are informed, is allegedly the Spanish translation of a manuscript by an Arabic historian, originally found in some old notebooks bought in Toledo. Consequently, at least within the plot created by Cervantes, the Quixote is not truly his, and it is in fact a translation which is not exactly reliable and whose accuracy cannot be checked. Furthermore, the translation from the Arabic was done by a morisco who, like the manuscript’s alleged author, could not be fully trusted because all Arabs tended to be liars. Thus, we might speculate, to the extent that Menard chose to reproduce such a plot, he might also be telling us that if the “original” Spanish text was already a somewhat unreliable translation of an original that could not be trusted, his own “version” should not be in any sense inferior to Cervantes’s. In other words, Menard and Cervantes would be at least equals, and both should be considered “authors” of the Quixote.

9. It has been almost a commonplace to view both writing and reading as forms of therapy. While writing (and, particularly, the writing of fiction), like daydreaming, allegedly gives writers the illusion that they may actually escape the powerlessness with which they have to deal in reality [Freud, “Creative Writers” 24–28], reading, like dreaming, will allow readers to be in touch with unconscious material that they need to address [Freud, “Interpretation of Dreams” 29–33]. To borrow from Felman’s Lacanian discussion of the unconscious, one could add that the unconscious “is not simply that which must be read, but also, and perhaps primarily, that which reads,” so much so that “whoever reads, interprets out of his unconscious, is an analy-sand” [21–22].
performance with pigs printed with false text and books,
Han Mo Art Center, Beijing, China
Relations of Influence and the Alibi of Translation

It is not difficult to find echoes of Borges’s own biography, interests, and habits in the many bookish characters he imprisoned in labyrinthine libraries with the mission of handling impossible writing tasks. It is in “Pierre Menard,” however, that Borges’s most profound meditation on the vicissitudes of writing and translating literary texts under the influence of a strong precursor are most clearly laid out. The general theme of “Pierre Menard,” that is, a radical revision of the relationship generally established between the original and its reproduction, is actually something that the young Borges was stimulated to reflect upon on the basis of his own experience. As he tells us, his first acquaintance with Cervantes’s masterpiece took place when he was a child, and it was through an English version, in a Garnier edition, which belonged to his father’s library. Later on, as a young man, when he read the Quixote in the original Spanish, it “sounded like a bad translation” [“Autobiographical Essay” 25]. As he elaborates, the relationship between original and translation, or between what one views as the original and its reproduction, is also ruled by an emotional investment: “at some point, my father’s library was broken up, and when I read the Quixote in another edition I had the feeling that it wasn’t the real Quixote. Later, I had a friend get me the Garnier, with the same steel engravings, the same footnotes, and also the same errata. All those things form part of the book for me; this I consider the real Quixote” [25].

In the same text, Borges describes his very first experiments with fiction writing, and we learn that in fact, as a child, he used to be a precocious version of our French Symbolist. At the age of “six or seven,” he “tried to imitate classic writers of Spanish—Miguel de Cervantes, for example,” and the first story he ever wrote was “a rather nonsensical piece after the manner of Cervantes, an old-fashioned romance called ‘la visera fatal’ [‘The fatal helmet’]” [26].

Cervantes was, by the way, an appropriate “subject presumed to know” for the Argentine writer if we consider, for instance, that the Spanish master was known both as a “man of letters” and as a “man of action,” something that was particularly attractive to young Borges, who had learned to revere his ancestors, among whom there were prominent military men and intellectuals. In his “Autobiographical Essay,” he relates the fact that he had “military forebears” to his “yearning after that epic destiny which [his] gods denied [him],” at the same time that he talks about his lonely childhood, his nearsightedness, his frailty: “as most of my people had been soldiers [. . .] and I knew I would never be, I felt ashamed, quite early, to be a bookish kind of person and not a man of action” [24]. He also comments on the “tradition of literature that ran through [his] father’s family,” and on how he knew at a very young age that he was expected to become a writer [25–26]. The opposition “man of letters/man of action” remained, as we know, a recurrent motif in his writings.

Furthermore, one can identify echoes of Menard’s inglorious achievements in Borges’s brief account of his father’s timid writing career: Jorge Guillermo Borges “was such a modest man that he would have liked being invisible,” and, like Menard, he had the habit of destroying his manuscripts [23]. Like Menard’s, his “visible” literary production never managed to go beyond a few humble attempts that did not escape the shadow of the authors he admired [25]. As “Pierre Menard” mirrors aspects and aspirations that could be associated not only with Borges’s, but also with his own father’s biography, and as the story’s general theme involves the complexities of influence, it is appropriate to take notice of the impact of his relationship with his father as his first

10. For a detailed discussion of this kind of emotional investment, and its relation to the notion of “original,” see Arrojo, “Literature as Fetishism.”
literary mentor. We have to consider, for example, the fact that his writing career was actually planned by Borges Senior, who early on made it quite clear that his son was expected “to fulfill the literary destiny” that blindness had denied him [25].

Also, the discovery of his father’s library was the “chief event” in his life [24]. and it was Borges Senior “who revealed the power of poetry” to him and who gave him his “first lesson in philosophy [. . . ,] the paradoxes of Zeno—Achilles and the tortoise, the unmoving flight of the arrow, the impossibility of motion [. . . , and] the rudiments of idealism” [24]. Understandably, most of Borges Senior’s literary interests became his: Shelley, Keats, Swinburne, books on metaphysics and psychology (Berkeley, Hume, Royce, and William James), as well as writings about the East (Lane, Burton, and Payne) [23].

As we examine some echoes of Borges’s biography in the story, it is also important to bear in mind that he wrote “Pierre Menard” only a few months after his father’s death and as he himself began recovering from a serious infection which kept him “between life and death” for over a month after an accident that took place at the end of 1938 (“Autobiographical Essay” 45). According to him, the story came to play a very special role in this crucial stage of his life and career. As he was recovering and wondering whether he could ever write again, he thought of trying something he had never done before because if he failed at that “it wouldn’t be so bad.” Since he had previously written “quite a few poems and dozens of short reviews,” he decided to write a story. “The result was ‘Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote’” [45].

The relationship between the first text Borges wrote after recovering and important events in his life in 1938 has been acknowledged by some of his readers. Didier Anzieu, for instance, distinguishes two stages in Borges’s entire literary career, one before and one after the death of his father and the 1938 accident [178; qtd. in Woscoboinik 31]. For Rodríguez Monegal, “the accident dramatized Borges’s guilt over Father’s death and his deep, totally unconscious need to be set free at last from Father’s tutelage.” To this extent, the accident represented “both a death (by suicide) and a rebirth,” and Borges emerged from it as a different writer, “a writer this time engendered by himself” [326]. Likewise, one might take into account that “Pierre Menard” was written not simply as “a halfway house between the essay and the true tale,” as Borges himself describes it [“Autobiographical Essay” 45], but also as a sort of perverse eulogy for the recently dead Menard in order to allegedly protect the latter’s “bright” memory from “error” (“Pierre Menard” 88). [13]

11. As Ricardo Piglia has remarked: “Borges must write for his father and with his name. Writing for his father, that is, in his place, but also thanks to him, thanks to his heritage” [92; my translation; also qtd. in Woscoboinik 208]. Julio Woscoboinik elaborates on such a “debt”: “Borges’s history, it seems, starts from this pact with his father. [. . .] Borges is a man of paradoxes and moves amid the paradoxes of family myth, rooted, on the one hand, in the heraldic memory of conservative Argentine aristocracy, and, on the other, in world literature, especially the English” [208]. As “the object of the desire of others,” and, thus, as “a subjected subject painfully chained to a destiny,” Borges often turned his sensation of being just “an echo of other echoes” into writing [208]. An appropriate illustration can be found in the story “The Circular Ruins.”

12. As Borges declares elsewhere in his “Autobiographical Essay,” he had in fact written fiction before “Pierre Menard.” According to him, “it was only after a long and roundabout series of timid experiments in narration [approximately from 1927 to 1933] that [he] sat down to write real stories” [42]. And the first “outright” story he actually wrote as an adult was “Hombre de la esquina rosada” (“Man on Pink Corner” 42). It is highly significant, however, that Borges neglected to mention this as he commented on “Pierre Menard” and its connection to the 1938 accident.

13. One might add that Borges’s narrator is not exactly kind to Pierre Menard. Even though, according to the plot, the text has allegedly been written in order to protect Menard’s memory
As an important milestone in Borges’s life, the writing of “Pierre Menard” seems to have symbolized a way of putting to rest the kind of modest literary career somewhat represented by his own (until then), as well as by that of his Menardian father, his first important precursor. Borges could not exactly “engender himself” as an author, nor could he be immune to the consequences of literary influence. Yet in the end he seemed to choose Cervantes (or what the latter represented as a universally celebrated and influential author) over the Quixotic Menard as a model to imitate. This was probably not an easy choice, no matter how subterranean it might have been, especially if we take into account the complex, delicate network of relationships that seems to be established in “Pierre Menard” between influence and transference. One might think for instance of the relationship between the author’s desire to be his own origin (a desire always fraught with guilt) and the debt allegedly owed to both intellectual and biological progenitors. Let us consider briefly in connection with this the visible and the invisible significance of “Pierre Menard” in Borges’s biography, as well as his own implicit and explicit statements on his personal and literary relationship with his father. Since his books grew essentially out of other texts, written by authors that he admired and emulated, it is tempting to endorse Bloom’s notion that Borges’s “idealization of influence relationships” is bound up with “a dread of what Freud called the family romance and of what might be termed the family romance of literature” [Western Canon 471]. From such a perspective, one could further explain not only why Pierre Menard’s eagerness in “composing” Cervantes’s masterpiece is associated with the subterranean and the invisible, but also why Borges often tries to downplay any implication of rivalry or competition in his commentaries on the kinds of relationships that are usually established between readers and writers, disciples and masters, including his own relationships with the several authors he turned into role models.

The attempt to neutralize any form of conflict or competition implied in such textual encounters emerges as different “symptoms” in Borges’s writings. One of them is his elaboration of the “doctrine,” somewhat borrowed from Paul Valéry, according to which “all authors are one author” [see “Coleridge’s Flower”], a conclusion that would divest the notion of “copying” another writer from any connotation of rivalry. As Borges concludes his essay, “those who carefully copy a writer do so impersonally, because they equate that writer with literature, because they suspect that to depart from him in the slightest is to deviate from reason and orthodoxy” [“Coleridge’s Flower” 242]. In a similar fashion, in “Kafka and His Precursors,” Borges explicitly proposes that the word precursor, although “indispensable in the vocabulary of criticism,” be “purified” from “any connotation of polemic or rivalry” [365]. Another manifestation of Borges’s desire to neutralize any conflict even remotely related to influence relation-

from misreadings, it ends up ridiculing the incommensurable gap that separates his ambitious goal from his actual achievements. In other words, as it has been pointed out above, the story does turn Menard into a pathetic Quixotic character. Also, if one considers the story from the point of view of the (invisible) struggle that Menard stages against his precursor, in the end Cervantes is still the huge author figure who has inspired Menard and so many others, while the latter’s complete body of work is nothing more than the laughable list of texts compiled by the narrator. Menard, as we learn, “took care” that his Quixote “not survive him” [95], and, thus, will remain forever the minor French Symbolist who imagined he could be the invisible author of a few fragments from the Quixote [Arrojo, “Borges e a Maldição de Babel” 149-63].

14. Appropriately, the desire to dissolve any potential difference between writers or thinkers, particularly between past and contemporary ones, is also a concern for our Borgesian Menard: “Thinking, meditating, imagining [. . .] are not anomalous acts—they are the normal respiration of the intelligence. To glorify the occasional exercise of that function, to treasure beyond price ancient and foreign thought, to recall with incredulous awe some doctor universalis thought, is to confess our own languor, or our own barbarie” [“Pierre Menard” 95].
ships may be his alleged modesty, expressed, for instance, in his recurrent declarations of debt to several precursors. In his “Autobiographical Essay,” for example, he refers to his attempts at imitating some of his early influences (Rafael Cansinos Assens, Macedonio Fernández, Francisco de Quevedo, and Diego de Saavedra Fajardo, among others) with verbs and expressions such as “to ape,” “to plagiarize,” “to play the sedulous ape to,” “to mimic,” “to crib” [33–38], which clearly emphasize the abyssal distance that allegedly separates master from disciple, in a manner that brings to mind the exemplary relationship he imagined between Cervantes and Pierre Menard.

Drawing on Borges’s explicit as well as subterranean statements on relations of influence, we may explore further the seminal role played by the practice of translation in the construction of his literary career. An allegedly invisible strategy to take over someone else’s text and authorial position, the practice of translation seems to have allowed Borges not only to play with the idea of being an-other, but also to imitate (and even to transform) the kind of writing he admired in the works of his favorite authors and which he felt compelled to dislodge and supplant with his own.15

**A Young Borges Discovers Walt Whitman: Transference, Translation, and the Birth of a Poet**

During his years as a teenager living in Europe, Borges was beginning to experiment with poetry writing, which was also significantly related to his interest in foreign languages, especially English, and in major European poets. As he reminisces in his “Autobiographical Essay,” before leaving Switzerland in 1919, he had been writing sonnets in English and in French: “the English sonnets were poor imitations of Wordsworth, and the French, in their own watery way, were imitative of symbolist poetry.” Raised in an aristocratic, bilingual household, which also sheltered his father’s now famous library, mainly comprised by English books,16 and in a peripheral country that used to relate everything British to high culture and civilization, Borges learned to associate the reading of literature with English.17 As he was to write in later years, he felt inevitably divided between English, a language that he often wished had been his “birthright,” and which he felt “unworthy to handle,” and Spanish, which, as “an Argentine writer, [he had] to cope with,” and of whose “shortcomings” he “was only too aware” [“Autobiographical Essay” 54]. Emotionally and intellectually situated between (at least) two languages, two cultures and two traditions, Borges was bound to be influenced by foreign literature and to turn translation into an essential vehicle that would allow him to move between the languages that made up his personal history.

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15. For detailed commentaries on Borges’s general translation strategies, and the use he made of his translations in the actual construction of his texts, see Kristal [particularly 88–134], and Costa.

16. Some of those books were the Britannica and Chambers’s Encyclopaedia. The first novel he ever read through was Huckleberry Finn. “Next came Roughing It and Flush Days in California. [He] also read books by Captain Marryat, Wells’s First Men in the Moon, Poe, a one-volume edition of Longfellow, Treasure Island, Dickens, Don Quixote, Tom Brown’s School Days, the Adventures of Mr. Verdant Green (a now-forgotten book), Burton’s A Thousand Nights and a Night” [“Autobiographical Essay” 25]. For an early study of the influence of English and American literatures on Borges’s work, see Christ.

17. Piglia elaborates on Borges’s “bilingualism,” emphasizing the ideological oppositions (between the Creole and the European, between courage and culture, between civilization and barbarism) that are at the basis of Argentine history, and which, for Borges, took the form of a family tradition [89–90].
Among his acknowledged masters, Walt Whitman played a decisive role in the shaping of his literary career, particularly in his early formative years in Europe as he was preparing to become a poet. He first became acquainted with Whitman’s work through a German translation by Johannes Schlaf (“Als ich in Alabama meinen Morgengang machte”—“As I have walk’d in Alabama my morning walk”), and the impact of this discovery would last practically all his life. In fact, it seems that while Borges learned to overcome his “infatuation” with other important influences such as Carlyle and Swinburne, “he never really got over Whitman” [Rodríguez Monegal 148]. As a close friend described him during his first visit to Spain in 1919, in those days he was completely “drunk with Whitman” [de Torre 62; qtd. in Rodríguez Monegal 139]. Soon the American poet became the exemplary model Borges would take after in his own search for poetic expression. As he remarked in a lecture given at the University of Texas at Austin, in 1961, when he first read Whitman he was “quite overwhelmed,” and felt that he had finally found his supreme master: “when a young man reads a great poet [. . .] he falls into thinking that the poet has at last, at long last, discovered how poetry should be written. So when I read Walt Whitman I got the feeling that all poets who had written before him, Homer, and Shakespeare, and Hugo, and Quevedo, and so on, had been trying to and failing to do, what Whitman HAD done” [qtd. in Jaén 51–52]. Even Borges’s interest in German expressionism—which also produced, according to him, “some of the first, and perhaps the only, translations of a number of expressionist poets into Spanish” [52]—was then mediated by his devotion to Whitman. As Borges wrote at the time, “the main source” of expressionism was “constituted by that athletic and Cyclopean vision that comes from Whitman’s rhythms and the plurality of his poetry” [Textos recobrados 52; trans. and qtd. in Kristal 43]. While his critical interest in the American poet produced at least two short essays, “El otro Whitman” (“The Other Whitman”) and “Nota sobre Walt Whitman” (“Note on Walt Whitman”), his infatuation with the American and his work seems to have been the subterranean motivation behind “Himno del mar,” the first poem he published while living in Europe in 1919, and, of course, also behind his Spanish version of Leaves of Grass (Hojas de hierba), whose publication, announced as early as 1927, did not happen until 1969.

While it was his father who had “revealed the power of poetry” to him, it was Walt Whitman who eventually became his ultimate “subject presumed to know” as soon as he started to take his poetry writing more seriously. It was under the spell of the American poet that he managed to publish “Himno del mar,” which appeared in a literary journal based in Seville, Spain, and which could even be read as a somewhat clumsy translation of some of Whitman’s best-known motifs. As Borges comments on the event, “in the poem, I tried my hardest to be Walt Whitman” [“Autobiographical Essay” 31]. The echoes of Whitman’s influence upon his young admirer’s first published poem are certainly easy to find, especially if one considers the rather vehement, overtly sensuous tone in which Borges’s poetic persona celebrates his “beloved Sea,” whose “mysterious” strength he finds comforting. “Himno del mar” is embarrassingly similar, for example, to the opening lines from section 22 of Whitman’s “Song of Myself”:

18. Borges never included “Himno del mar” in any of his published poetry collections, and seemed to be aware of its shortcomings, particularly its obvious connection with Whitman’s work. In reference to the poem, he writes: “years after [its publication], I came across Arnold Bennett’s phrase ‘the third-rate grandiose.’ I understood at once what he meant” [“Autobiographical Essay” 31].

19. All English quotations from Borges’s “Himno del mar” are my translations from the Spanish.
You sea! I resign myself to you also—I guess what you mean, / I behold from
the beach your crooked inviting fingers, / I believe you refuse to go back with-
out feeling of me, / We must have a turn together, I undress, hurry me out of
sight of the land, / Cushion me soft, rock me in billowy drowse, / Dash me with
amorous wet, I can repay you. / Sea of stretch’d ground-swells, / Sea breathing
broad and convulsive breaths, / Sea of the brine of life and of unshovell’d yet
always-ready graves, / Howler and scooper of storms, capricious and dainty
sea, / I am integral with you, I too am of one phase and of all phases. [84]20

The sensuous atmosphere that dominates Borges’s poem is basically created by
the sexualization of the sea (often addressed as “Mar,” with a capital “M”) and of na-
ture in general, which is a recurrent motif in Whitman’s poetry, and which seems to be
the main inspiration for the imagery chosen by Borges in his first poem. Thus, while
Borges’s “muscular” sea is “naked” and “athletic,” and has “swift hands” [25], Whit-
man’s has “inviting fingers” [84]. At the same time, while Borges’s “virgin beaches”
have “golden breasts” [24], Whitman’s “night” is “bare-bosom’d” and “mad naked,”
and his “earth” is “voluptuous” and “cool-breath’d” [84]. As the persona in Whitman’s
poem, Borges’s speaker establishes a loving relationship with his humanized, sensually
charged sea: as he enters “the enormous garden” of the sea’s waters, and swims away
from the shore [24], he experiences an “instant of magnificent plenitude” [25]. And as
his body fights the sea’s “swift muscles,” he leaves behind his past amorous encounters
and disappointments and offers them to the winds [25]. In order to celebrate the sea,
who “is the only one” for him now, Borges’s poetic persona wishes to create a poem
that might reproduce the “Adamic rhythm” of the sea’s waves [25]. Finally, in the last
lines, he explicitly tells us why he loves and identifies with the sea: “And I know why I
love you. I know that we are very old. / That we have known each other for centuries. /
. . . Oh, protean, I have sprung from you. / Both of us shackled and wandering! / Both
of us intensely yearning for stars. / Both of us hopeful and disappointed. / Both of us
air, light, strength, darkness; / Both of us with our vast desire and both of us with our
great misery!” [26]. As the persona in “Himno del mar” finds solace in the mirror ef-
effect of an idealized identification with the sea, it does not seem far-fetched to read it
as a sort of subterranean celebration of Borges’s own deep attraction to Whitman and
his poetry. Therefore, the sea (as “Brother,” “Father,” and “Beloved”), from whom
Borges’s poetic persona “has sprung,” and with whom he finds so much in common,
could be representing Whitman as the ultimate Poet himself, that is, that powerful voice
which entices readers particularly interested in writing poetry with an irresistible invi-
tation presented right at the beginning of “Song of Myself”: “Stop this day and night
with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems” [25; see also Bastos 221]. And
it is certainly significant that the poetic persona in “Himno del mar” wants to celebrate
the sea-as-Whitman by creating a poem that might reproduce the “Adamic rhythm” of

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20. Compare Whitman’s lines to the following from Borges’s “Himno del mar”: “Brother,
Father, Beloved. . . ! / I enter the enormous garden of your waters and I swim far away from the
earth. / [. . .] I am with you, Sea. And my body, stretched out like an arch, fights against your swift
muscles. You are the only one for me. / [. . .] Oh, sea! Oh, myth! Oh, sun! Oh, immense bed! / And
I know why I love you. I know we are very old. / And that we have known each other for centuries.
/ [. . .] Oh, protean, I have sprung from you.” [24–26]. See also Cortínez 75, and Bastos 222.

21. It is appropriate to add that swimming was allegedly one of Borges’s few experiences of
actual “physical happiness” [Cortínez 76]. As he declared in an interview to Barnstone: “I think
I have known moments of happiness. I suppose all men have. There are moments, let’s say, love,
riding, swimming, talking to a friend, let’s say, conversation, reading, even writing, or rather,
not writing but inventing something” [Borges at Eighty 18, also qtd. in Cortínez 76]. See also
Rodríguez Monegal 479.
his waves. It is under the influence of the poetry that comes from the sea, that Borges’s persona wishes to celebrate Whitman and create a poem. As the poet who claimed to be “integral” with the sea, with the universe, and even with all of humankind, Whitman must have seemed not only to harbor the secret and the strength of poetry writing, but also to offer his shy, impressionable reader a shelter away from his adolescent disappointments as well as the promise of a harmonious, pleasurable perspective on a natural life not yet divorced from literature.

Furthermore, even though “Himno del mar” does not match the optimistic, confident outlook on the relationship of writing to living that we find in Whitman, it would not be difficult to find echoes of the latter’s celebration of homoeroticism in Borges’s enthusiastic praise of the sea’s nurturing of masculine power. In a piece on Borges’s “phobic treatment” of homosexuality, Daniel Balderston appropriately relates Borges’s story “The Other,” first published in the collection El libro de arena (Book of Sand) in 1975, to the latter’s interest in Whitman, particularly in his early years as a poet apprentice [“Fecal Dialectic” 7]. This story affords us some insights into how Borges constructed literally his young self. In February of 1969, the older Borges has an encounter in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with the young man he used to be in his early years in Geneva, and who is working on his first book of poetry (which he plans to call “Red Anthems—Red Rhythms or Red Songs” [“The Other” 414]). This project is also obviously connected to his interest in Whitman, especially as it is supposed to be “a hymn to the brotherhood of all mankind,” and to address “the great oppressed and outcast masses” [414]. As both Borgeses start discussing poetry “on a bench besides the Charles River” [411], the young man “fervently” recites “that short poem in which Whitman recalls a night shared beside the sea—a night when Whitman had been truly happy” [415]. While the older Borges is primarily interested in the poetic effect of what is allegedly being narrated in the poem (“If Whitman sang of that night [. . .] it’s because he desired it but it never happened. The poem gains in greatness if we sense that it is the expression of a desire, a longing, rather than the narration of an event” [416]), his younger self is moved precisely by what he perceives to be the narration of Whitman’s real life experience (“You don’t know him [. . .] Whitman is incapable of falsehood” [416]). Both Cortínez [76] and Balderston [“Fecal Dialectic” 7] claim that Borges is referring to Whitman’s “When I heard at the close of the day,” which

22. As an illustration, one may consider, for example, that while Borges’s poetic persona in “Himno del mar” looks for the sea in an attempt to leave behind his love disappointments, in Whitman’s section 22 of “Song of Myself,” for example, it is the sea which “refuses to go back without feeling [him]” [84]. In other words, in contrast with Borges’s, Whitman’s persona is portrayed as a strong man who is in perfect harmony with all that is inside and around him, and who is not running away from anything. The poem is, in fact, an affirmation of his power to celebrate both “virtue” and “vice,” “goodness” and “wickedness” [84–85]. See also Bastos 222.

23. In his “Autobiographical Essay,” Borges describes “The Red Psalms or The Red Rhythms,” which he “destroyed” in Spain at the end of 1920, as “a collection of poems—perhaps some twenty in all—in free verse and in praise of the Russian Revolution, the brotherhood of man, and pacifism” [33]. One of the poems collected in the book was no other than “Himno del mar” [see Textos recobrados 24n1].

24. As Borges declared in one of the Norton lectures delivered in the fall of 1967, “[in Geneva,] I was a very unhappy young man. [. . .] Then I discovered an author who doubtless was a very happy man. It must have been in 1916 that I came to Walt Whitman, and then I felt ashamed of my unhappiness” [This Craft of Verse 104].

25. “When I heard at the close of the day how my name had been receiv’d with plaudits in the Capitol, still it was not a happy night for me that follow’d, / And else when I carous’d, or when my plans were accomplish’d, still I was not happy, / But the day when I rose at dawn from
can also be related to “Himno del mar,” especially if we concentrate on the poem’s first part, which describes the poetic persona’s joy as he bathes in the “cool waters” of the sea. However, while in Whitman’s poem, “joy” is explicitly associated with a homosexual encounter, in Borges’s, “the instant of magnificent plenitude” experienced by his poetic persona can only be shared in the company of the sea as “Brother,” “Father,” and “Beloved.”26 In other words, while Whitman’s persona rejoices in the company of his “dear friend [his] lover,” Borges’s only finds solace in his solitary swim and in celebrating the sea as his double: “both of us with our vast desire and both of us with our great misery” [26].

This is certainly not the place to speculate on Borges’s phobic treatment of homoeroticism. Nevertheless, the revealing dialogue between a young, expatriate persona of Borges and the cosmopolitan, world-renowned Borges, who is being honored by Harvard University, illustrates not only the extent of Borges’s investment in the character and the achievement of Whitman, but also the lasting effect of his transferential bond with the American poet. It seems that for the younger Borges, the American poet, who was “incapable of falsehood,” had managed to reconcile an allegedly exciting, adventurous, “happy” life with a literary career and, thus, to translate successfully his own personal experiences into meaningful, inspiring poetry. If Cervantes was “the subject presumed to know” in Menard’s biography, Whitman represented for the younger Borges the desirable, idealized possibility of a life devoted to writing which did not have to be restricted to the ascetic, confining limits of his own domestic library. At the same time, the older Borges, already in his seventies, who no longer seems to believe in the possibility of reconciling the poet’s mask with his real (perhaps melancholy) face, is still trying to come to grips with the direction he chose for his own life through an understanding of his relationship with Whitman’s literary persona. One may thus conclude that while the younger Borges wants to emulate his own idealized version of Whitman, the older Borges seems interested in turning the American poet into a reflection of himself, as he seems to find comfort in the idea that Whitman’s real life was perhaps not very different from his own.27

Fernando Alegría has also called attention to Borges’s interest in “defining Whitman as a double,” and appropriately quotes “Nota sobre Walt Whitman,” in which Borges claims that “there are two Whitmans”: “the ‘friendly and eloquent savage’ of Leaves of Grass and the poor man of letters that invented him. This one was chaste, reserved and rather taciturn; but the other, effusive and orgiastic” [194–95; trans. and qtd. in Alegría 212–13]. As Alegría remarks, the “chaste, reserved, and rather taciturn”

26. Cortínez, who does not mention the explicit homoerotic references in Whitman’s poem, considers “When I heard at the close of the day” a key text to study the connection between Whitman’s poetry and Borges’s “Himno del mar” [76]. Interestingly enough, in Kristal’s comments on the same poem, Borges’s poetic voice gets mixed up with Whitman’s. According to him, the poem mentioned in “The Other” could be a description of Borges’s first published poem [48].

27. As Borges declared in 1967, “now that I have reread Walt Whitman, and also biographies of him, I suppose that perhaps when Walt Whitman read his Leaves of Grass he may have said to himself: ‘Oh! If only I were Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son!’ (from ‘Song of Myself’ section 24, line 1). Because doubtless he was a very different kind of man. Doubtless he evolved ‘Walt Whitman’ from himself—a kind of fantastic projection” [This Craft of Verse 104].
man who wrote *Leaves of Grass* “is very much like” Borges himself [213], and also very much like the several bookish characters he introduced in his fictions and essays. But this confinement to an ascetic life fully devoted to books does bring some consolation. As Borges remarks in relation to Whitman, what is most important about the poet from Camden is that “the happy vagabond described in the poems of *Leaves of Grass* would not have been capable himself of writing them” [Prosa completa 1: 195]. In the same text, he refers to Whitman as “this friend, who is an old American poet of the nineteenth century, and is also his own legend, and also each one of us, and happiness as well” [198]. It is to this dear “friend,” to this “eternal Whitman,” that Borges often declares his indebtedness as poet.

As happens in the story of Pierre Menard’s relationship to Cervantes, the workings of transference and the practice of translation underwrite Borges’s lifelong engagement with Whitman’s poetry and literary persona. Although one might conjecture that Borges began his translations from the American poet soon after he became acquainted with his work, the earliest reference to his project of publishing those translations dates back to February of 1927, when the Argentinean literary journal *Martín Fierro* announced his forthcoming version of *Leaves of Grass* as “an important enterprise” that would render “the compact production of Whitman into our language; and [. . .] according to Borges’s design: to produce such a close fit with the original and its author’s innovative conception that the reader will be in contact with the most genuine Whitman and his informal style down to his vocabulary in the argot, or low-brow English, of the United States” [trans. and qtd. in Kristal 49]. And yet, Borges’s attempt at producing “the most genuine Whitman” in Spanish had to remain practically invisible for more than forty years. It was not until 1969—the same year in which the older Borges meets his young self in the plot of “The Other”—that he finally published *Hojas de hierba*, his “selections and translations” of *Leaves of Grass.*

Efrain Kristal attributes the long hiatus between the 1927 announcement and the actual publication of Borges’s translation to his “evolving interpretation” of Whitman, which presumably “dissuaded him from publishing his early version of *Leaves of Grass*” in the 1920s [50]. According to Kristal, by 1969 Borges was ready to publish his version as he “had developed a richer and more nuanced view of the matter,” in particular of the relationship between Whitman, the literary persona of *Leaves of Grass*, and the actual man who wrote the poems [50]. While I tend to agree with Kristal’s general argument, I cannot help advancing a more subtle reason why it took Borges more than forty years to publish his version of Whitman’s poems. Let us remember that in 1927 Borges was still struggling to find his own poetic voice. As he reminisces in his “Autobiographical Essay,” the 1920s were, for him, a period of “great activity, but much of it was perhaps reckless and even pointless” [37]. By 1927 he had pub-

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28. In an interview given in the early 1980s, Borges further elaborates on his identification with Whitman in a manner that clearly reminds us of “Borges and I,” the piece he wrote on the alleged division between Borges, the man, and Borges, the well-known author [Collected Fictions 324]: “[Whitman] created this very strange character, Walt Whitman, not to be taken for the writer of the book. [. . .] He attempted a very daring experiment, the most daring and the most successful experiment in all literature as far as I know. [. . .] The central character would be called after the author, Walt Whitman, but he was, firstly, Walt Whitman the human being, the very unhappy man who wrote *Leaves of Grass*” [Barnstone, Borges at Eighty 136].

29. Appropriate examples of Borges’s acknowledgment of his indebtedness to Whitman can be found in the prologues he wrote to his poetry collections. For representative examples, see Poesía completa (Complete Poetry). Readers of Borges’s poetry have also been interested in discussing his alleged debt to Whitman, particularly in his early years as a poet [see Bastos].

30. Fragments of Borges’s earlier version of *Leaves of Grass* appeared in his two essays on Whitman, “El otro Whitman” and “Nota sobre Walt Whitman.”
lished only two books of poetry. The publication of the first one, *Fervor de Buenos Aires (Adoration of Buenos Aires)*, in 1923, was a domestic, amateurish production, financed by Borges Senior. As Borges explains: “the book was actually printed in five days. [. . .] I had bargained for sixty-four pages, but the manuscript ran too long and at the last minute five poems had to be left out—mercifully. I can’t remember a single thing about them” [34]. His second book of poetry, *Luna de enfrente (Moon across the Way)*, published in 1925, was not exactly worth remembering, either. It was, in his words, “a kind of riot of sham local color,” and, although some of its poems did get reprinted, in later editions Borges “dropped the worst poems, pruned the eccentricities, and successively—through several reprints—revised and toned down the verses” [39]. Therefore, one could further speculate that while he was trying to find his own voice, Borges’s translations of Whitman had to remain, perhaps, only a subterranean exercise, an invisible effort. We might consider, for instance, that if he had indeed published *Hojas de hierba* in the 1920s, the comparisons that would have been made between his translations and his own early poetry might have imprisoned him forever in the role of the seduced reader and translator of a major literary master who, like Pierre Menard, was unable to be more than “an echo of other echoes,” and could only dream of greater challenges.

As we know, Borges continued to write poetry and short essays until the mid-1930s, when he produced his first distinctively Borgesian story, “The Approach to al-Mu’tasim,” which he defines as “both a hoax and a pseudo-essay,” and which is considered as a precursor to “Pierre Menard” [43]. By 1942, when he published his first collection of stories, *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan (The Garden of Forking Paths)*, he had finally found his own means of literary expression, and decided to become “a part-time poet” only [Rodríguez Monegal 375]. Therefore, we may infer, his infatuation with Whitman was no longer the main focus of his literary career. By 1969, when he published his version of *Leaves of Grass*, Borges was already a major author, known worldwide for his unique brand of fiction writing. After being translated into French in the 1950s, he became quite visible both in Argentina and abroad. In 1961 he shared the prestigious Formentor Prize with Samuel Beckett, and as a consequence his books “mushroomed overnight throughout the Western world” [“Autobiographical Essay” 52]. In the same year, Borges made his first visit to his beloved United States, where he was honored as a visiting professor at the University of Texas at Austin. In 1967, his second trip to America took him to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he held the Charles Eliot Norton Chair of Poetry at Harvard University and “lectured to well-wishing audiences on ‘The Craft of Verse’” [52]. At the end of his stay in the country, he “was greatly honored to have [his] poems read at the YMHA Poetry Center in New York, with several of [his] translators reading and a number of poets in the audience” [53]. It seems that by then, as he was widely known both in Spanish and in English, and celebrated both as a storywriter and as a poet, Borges was finally ready to share his translations of Whitman with Spanish-reading audiences.

As an important expression of Borges’s lifelong interest in the American poet, *Hojas de hierba*, like Pierre Menard’s *Quixote*, might help us further reflect not only on the subterranean motivations of his own attempts at “repeating in a foreign tongue a book that already existed” [“Pierre Menard” 95], but also on the essentially performative role played by translation as a form of invisible authorship. Even though his long-lasting love affair with Whitman’s work and persona was obviously more productive—and had a happier end—than Menard’s unacknowledged obsession with Cervantes, in both cases translation seems to have played a fundamental, even therapeutic, role in helping these two ambitious, Quixotic readers deal with the conflicts of influence and act out their desire to be someone else. While Borges did try his “hard-
est” to be Whitman in “Himno del mar,” it was in his translations of the American poet that he was able to somehow become a Spanish version of Whitman’s poetic persona and occupy the highly desirable universe of one of his most important precursors, and, thus, temporarily ignore himself, his superego, and his family romance. In such a safe, privileged authorial position, Borges was able, for instance, to select which poems he was going to (re)write, and produced versions, which, as one of his readers has pointed out, are “autonomous” poems in Spanish that do not need to be read as “dependent” on Whitman’s originals [Aparicio 133].

As an instrument that might have helped Borges escape Borges and the Borgesian, translation seems to have allowed him to pretend to be an-other and, in the Other’s name, to write, in his native Spanish, that which he was unable to address in his own texts and in his own name. If in his Whitmanesque “Himno del mar” he could not completely lose himself in the sea of otherness and leave behind a certain melancholy, resigned tone that came to be known as a typically Borgesian trait, as well as the “un-happiness” of which he was allegedly ashamed, in his Spanish version of *Leaves of Grass*, Borges managed to have his poetic persona take over what he admired and desired in the American poet’s originals, and, thus, on some level, to be the “effusive and orgiastic” Walt Whitman, “a man of adventure and love, indolent, full of life, carefree, a wanderer in America,” as he himself refers to Whitman’s persona in the opening paragraph of his prologue to *Hojas de hierba* [21]. Therefore, one might also argue that, as he translated *Leaves of Grass*, Borges did not simply imitate Whitman, as he could not keep himself from doing in his first published poem, but was actually able to say, and not merely reproduce, that which the American had written and thus to be “defined,” for instance, by lines such as these: “Walt Whitman, un cosmos, de Manhattan el hijo, / Turbulento, carnal, sensual, comiendo, bebiendo, engendrando” [59] (“Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son, / Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding” [86]). The possibility of expressing one’s subterranean desires and fantasies through someone else’s words, which can be associated with reading and translating, was something that the author of “Pierre Menard” obviously knew quite well. As he comments in the prologue to *Hojas de hierba*, the reader, who, as he claims, is an integral part of *Leaves of Grass*, “has always tended to identify with the protagonist of a text; to read Macbeth is in some way to be Macbeth. Walt Whitman, as far as we know, was the first to take advantage of this temporary identification to the fullest” [21]. Thus, and particularly in Borges’s own case, if reading Whitman was in some way to be Whitman, translating him was an efficient way not only of rewriting that which seemed so attractive in his poetry, but also of celebrating and of being forever associated with the American poet. As in Menard’s relationship with Cervantes, it was possible for Borges, as the translator of *Leaves of Grass*, not only to be the actual writer of *Hojas de hierba*, but also to pay tribute to his “subject presumed to know,” at the same time that he could disguise the violence of his possessive love with the “alibi” of fidelity to Whitman and his text.32

31. Once again Borges comments on the two Whitmans, the two opposing, complementary personae who appropriately mirror his own division between what he is and what he wishes he could be. Thus, to his idealized version of Whitman’s poetic persona, Borges opposes the “real” Whitman, “a modest journalist from Long Island” [21].

32. In his typically modest tone, Borges states, in the prologue to *Hojas de hierba*, that he is aware of the “deficiencies” of his work, which “oscillates between personal interpretation and resigned rigor,” while he reassures his reader that in spite of the inadequacies that may be found in his translations, the strength of Whitman’s poetry will certainly come through [22]. For commentaries on the translations, see, for example, Kristal; Alegria; Aparicio; Valero Garcés.
Considering Borges’s acknowledged desire to be Whitman, it does seem significant that of all the poems collected in *Leaves of Grass*, the only one he chose to translate in its entirety was “Song of Myself” with its fifty-two sections, and which opens with the well-known lines that affirm the strength and the unflinching, unrestricted self-acceptance and self-love of Whitman’s poetic persona and Borges’s idealized “semidivine vagabond”: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belong to you” [63]. In fact, the general theme of “Song of Myself” is precisely the celebration of a “self” that is in perfect harmony with his body, his fellow men and women, and with the universe, and who lives life to the fullest:

*Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean, / Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest.* [66]

*The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of distillation, it is odorless, / It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it.* [64]

*I am enamour’d of growing out-doors, / Of men that live among cattle or taste of the ocean or woods.* [75]

In the cathartic writing exercise provided by translation, the cerebral, “chaste, reserved and rather taciturn” Borges, who, like the fictional obsessive men of letters of his stories, allegedly spent most of his days and nights surrounded by books, had the opportunity to recreate an “effusive and orgiastic” persona and to write lines such as the following: “Soy el poeta del Cuerpo y soy el poeta del Alma, / Los goces del cielo están conmigo y los tormentos del infierno están conmigo, / Los primeros los injerto y los multiplico em mi ser, los últimos los traduzco a un nuevo idioma” [55] (“I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul, / The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me, / The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue” [83]).

It is also relevant to consider that at the same time that “Song of Myself” celebrates Whitman’s own poetic persona and his passionate love for all that surrounds him, it also proposes an open, generous, productive relationship between authorship and reading, in which the poet and his reader (the precursor and his follower, the master and his disciple) are not only equals, but are also encouraged to establish a rather close, loving bond as Whitman’s persona invites his reader to join him and offers him both “the origin of all poems” and the promise of a relationship that is free from any form of influence anxiety, and which will allow him “to take things” and “filter them” from himself:

*Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems, / You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,) / You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the specters in books, / You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, / You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.* [64–65]

Considering Borges’s reticence about any possible conflict involved in influence relationships as well as his recurrent concern about being just “an echo of other echoes,” one might speculate on how attractive and, at the same time, how liberating it must have
seemed for Borges to compose Whitman’s text. As he wrote *Hojas de hierba*, Borges had the opportunity to (re)create a truly magnanimous authorial figure that could fully express and accept the self he wished to be, and, more importantly, that was also ready to welcome and nurture seduced readers and disciples, and even to protect them from the risk of becoming mere “echoes” of their master and favorite poet.

If we take Borges’s lessons on translation and on its relationship with the so-called “original” writing to their last consequences, and, thus, if in a Borgesian (or Menardian) fashion, we read both *Hojas de hierba* and “Himno del mar” as poems written by Borges in the wake of his attraction to Whitman, we will find that while the latter is definitely more Borgesian than any of the poems collected in *Hojas de hierba*, it is also a much weaker, much less original poetic statement (at least in Spanish) than Borges’s versions of the American poet. At the same time, of course, we might conclude, among other things, that while the “miserable” poetic persona in “Himno del mar” is only a timid “echo” of the huge authorial figure represented by Whitman, the persona in *Hojas de hierba* is self-loving, sensual, and truly unconventional, fully endorsing the American poet’s pansexual outlook and explicit celebration of homoeroticism. Thus, the rather subtle homoerotic celebration of male strength and companionship that underlies “Himno del mar,” for example, gets to be unabashedly visible in poems such as “Cuando supe al declinar del día,” Borges’s version of “When I Heard at the Close of the Day,” which, as I have commented on above, has also been associated with both “Himno del mar” and the story “The Other,” and in which the pleasure and the happiness that its poetic persona derives from his contact with the sea is also directly related to the upcoming visit of his “querido amigo, [su] amante” (“dear [male] friend, [his] lover”).

And yet, one might also speculate that, in spite of the fact that Borges often defended the possibility of a relationship between reading and writing that could apparently transcend the conflicts involved in transference, he would not have welcomed any comparison between “Himno del mar” and his versions of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. First of all, as we know, he never included “Himno del mar” in any of his collections, and it was only published in *Textos recobrados* more than a decade after his death. Outside the protective limits of translation and of the invisible, “temporary identification” it makes possible, and in spite of his recurrent defense of a conception of authorship that could be devoid of any notion of property or individuality, Borges, like Pierre Menard, did seem to be interested in erasing the traces of his blatant attempts at being an-Other, and, thus, in protecting himself from the critical eyes of readers who might expose his early texts to a judgmental, perhaps unkind scrutiny. In fact, as I pay special attention to Borges’s translations of the poems from *Leaves of Grass* that have been connected to “Himno del mar,” it seems significant, for example, that in the edition of *Hojas de hierba* which I am using there is no poem number 22 in “Canto de mí mismo,” that is, the exact same text which has been identified by a few of his readers as the main source of inspiration for his first published poem. And as I try to find a plausible explanation for the fact that what was originally poem 22 has become the continuation of section 33. I refer, for example, to Borges’s narrator in “Pierre Menard,” who finds himself reading the *Quijote*, “the entire *Quijote*, as if Menard had conceived it”: “A few nights ago, as I was leafing through Chapter XXVI (never attempted by Menard), I recognized our friend’s style, could almost hear his voice in this marvelous phrase: ‘the nymphs of the rivers, the moist and grieving Echo’” [92].

34. Readers of *Hojas de hierba* have commented on Borges’s “fidelity” to the American poet’s sexual references. According to Alegria, for example, “it is quite possible that no Hispanic translator has ever equaled Borges in his masterful versions of Whitman’s ambiguous sex poems” [214]. See also Kristal 56–57.
21, I cannot help identifying with Borges’s narrator in “Pierre Menard” and his inevitable pretension of establishing the meaning of a text that Menard “would allow no one to see” [“Pierre Menard” 95]. Moreover, from this (pretentious) stance, one might think about “The Other,” for example, and, more specifically, about the protective, tender feelings that the older Borges confesses to harbor toward his younger self (“I, who have never been a father, felt a wave of love for that poor young man who was dearer to me than a child of my own flesh and blood” [414]). One might also think about the narrator of “The Circular Ruins,” who worries about the future of the son he has engendered and wishes he could spare him the “humiliation” of being just a “simulacrum,” or the mere echo of another echo [100]. Or, obviously, we might also be dealing with a typesetter’s minor mistake and, like Pierre Menard, would be running the risk of “enrich[ing] the slow and rudimentary art of reading by means of a new technique—the technique of deliberate anachronism and fallacious attribution” [95].

Finally, as I ponder the dangers of reading and some of the invisible or subterranean struggles that seem to underlie the always delicate and complex relationship that binds (and separates) readers and authors, translators and originals, and as I try to come to terms with my own transferential bond with Borges and his texts, and, thus, as I become aware of my desire not only to learn from his writings, but also to somehow outsmart and frame him, I cannot help admiring his painful but undoubtedly successful lifelong quest to find his own authorial voice and to become a widely recognized “subject presumed to know,” fully endowed with the power to seduce readers and to inspire them to study, interpret, translate, emulate, and even criticize him. If we consider, for instance, that the first story he ever wrote, “La visera fatal,” was allegedly inspired by his love for the English version of Don Quixote, it could not be more appropriate that he is now often remembered together with Cervantes as one of the most influential Hispanic writers of all time.

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