

Readerly/writerly and Pierre Menard

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 16 Dec 1999

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Michael Straight — 16 Dec 1999, 08:15

On Wed, 15 Dec 1999, Jim Henley wrote:

This came up before. But this seems a good place to adduce Borges' "Pierre Menard." The narrator of that story claims that Menard's rewrite of Cervantes produces a radically new text. But Borges makes it pretty clear that the narrator of that story is a jerk, and maybe a fool. So...

Interesting. What makes you read it that way rather than as Borges himself narrating with his tongue firmly in his cheek?

The Imitation of Christ by James Joyce is still on my must-read-someday list.

Just because we can't quantifiably have a 'correct' reading, it doesn't necessarily follow that we can't distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' readings.

This is superb! I don't suppose you could manage to appear at the sacred windows of every high school english class in the land, could you? It would eliminate a host of sorrows.

I agree too, but would add that it makes sense only within a community of readers that has decided on some criteria for 'good' and 'bad'. Crowley's

Little, Big is almost certainly not intended as Christian allegory, but if Jim Jordan enjoyed reading it that way, I wouldn't insist that his reading was 'bad,' particularly if he wasn't arguing that his was the only 'right' way to read it.

-Rostrum

Jim Henley — 16 Dec 1999, 19:47 · follows Michael Straight

-----Original Message-----

From: urth-errors at lists.best.com [mailto:urth-errors at lists.best.com]On Behalf Of Michael Straight

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A fair question. Since I'm feeling under the weather I want to take the lazy man's way out and give the briefest of quotes followed by an appeal to extra-textual authority. In a sense, I will be relying on a theory of author construction akin to Foucault's, but like I said, I'm going to bed

early.

In the first paragraph, the narrator damns a newspaper that has published an account of Menard's oeuvre because its "Protestant leanings are surely no secret." What's more, he sniffs that its readers are "few and Calvinist (if not Masonic and circumcised)." IOW, the narrator is a catholic reactionary. Borges hated his country's catholic reactionaries (for their anglophobia not least). More importantly, the narrator is an antisemite ("Masonic and circumcised"). And there's nothing Borges hated more than antisemitism.

So I can't see that the narrator is (WARNING: PROBLEMATIC WORD COMING!) intended as a version of Borges himself, or even someone the reader is supposed to like much. And Borges' philosemitism and anti-antisemitism were so deep that I can't but see the passage as a rather large clue that we are not to take the narrator's opinion on anything at face value.

I suspect I could make a fuller case with more time and energy. In general, I think that Borges indeed "invented postmodernism," but he did it as a warning, not a prophecy.

Best,

Jim

"It ain't the knife thru your heart that tears you apart
it's just the thought of someone sticking it in"

-- Graham Parker, "Protection"