

October 2013

Borges and the Basques: Notes on Reading an Invisible Literature

David Laraway

Brigham Young University, david_laraway@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/boga>

 Part of the [Basque Studies Commons](#), [Latin American Literature Commons](#), and the [Other Spanish and Portuguese Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Laraway, David (2013) "Borges and the Basques: Notes on Reading an Invisible Literature," *BOGA: Basque Studies Consortium Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/boga/vol1/iss1/3>

Borges and the Basques: Notes on Reading an Invisible Literature

Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to Cody Hanson for providing me with the references to the interviews in which Borges discussed the Basques; in large measure, those references catalyzed this project.



Borges and the Basques: Notes on Reading an Invisible Literature¹

David Laraway
Brigham Young University

The Basques, the narrator of Jose Luis Borges' "El congreso" [The Congress] once sniffed, are an unjustifiably proud people on the margins of history who have never been good for anything but milking cows (*Obras* 3:24).² To be sure, the literary heritage of the Basques had for many years been nothing to brag about: as recently as the mid-nineteenth century, the total number of works written in Euskera barely reached a hundred. Ironically, by the time Borges published his story in 1975, a major literary renaissance in the Basque Country was well underway, one that saw Basque writers condense what had taken decades of literary evolution in other national literatures into just a few years. By the end of the twentieth century, the total number of books published in the Basque language had increased exponentially, averaging well over one thousand titles annually (Olaziregi, "Literatura Vasca").

The view of the narrator of "The Congress" was one that Borges liked to represent as his own as well. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from a newspaper interview, in which Borges says of the Basques that they are a completely superfluous people who have contributed nothing of note to universal history or culture:

Well, we were with a Basque gentleman, Bioy [Casares] and I are both of Basque heritage as well, and I thought that if there had never been any Basques, [...] the history of the world would have been no different. On the other hand, if you were to imagine a world without Jews, a world without the Greeks, without Romans or even a world without France or England, things would be totally different. So then I said to Bioy: if we were to imagine a world without Basques, the difference would be imperceptible.³ (Espejo 8)

Borges apparently found the conceit sufficiently amusing that he repeated it almost word for word in at least two other interviews, each time going on to observe that a world without Basques would be akin to a world without flies although, he notes, flies are somewhat more annoying (Diament 46; cf. Neustadt).

¹Editor's note. Jorge Luis Borges (24 August 1899 – 14 June 1986), was a short-story writer, essayist, poet and translator who was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. His most famous books, *Ficciones* (1944) and *The Aleph* (El Aleph in Spanish) (1949), are compilations of short stories interconnected by common themes such as dreams, labyrinths, libraries, mirrors, animals, fictional writers, philosophy, religion and God. Borges's works have contributed to philosophical literature and also to both the fantasy and realism genres. He became completely blind at the age of fifty five, and was unable to read from this point on, never learning braille. In 1961 he came to international attention when he received the first ever Prix International, and then the Jerusalem Prize. His work was translated and published widely in the United States and in Europe. Borges himself was fluent in several languages. Writer and essayist J. M. Coetzee said of him: "He, more than anyone, renovated the language of fiction and thus opened the way to a remarkable generation of Spanish American novelists." He was awarded honorary doctorates from the universities of Columbia, Yale, Oxford, Michigan, Santiago de Chile, the Sorbonne and Harvard.

² "[...] gente que al margen de la historia no ha hecho otra cosa que ordeñar vacas." All translations of Borges, here and throughout the paper, are my own.

³ "Bueno, estábamos con un señor de origen vasco, Bioy y yo somos de origen vasco también, y pensé que si no hubiera vascos la historia universal o, como malamente se llama, la historia mundial, sería exactamente la misma. En cambio, si usted quiere imaginar un mundo sin judíos, un mundo sin griegos, sin romanos o igualmente un mundo sin Francia, ni Inglaterra, ese mundo cambia totalmente. Entonces le dije a Bioy: si imaginamos un mundo sin vascos la diferencia será imperceptible."

We might be tempted to write these comments off as the ramblings of an elderly curmudgeon or perhaps a sly provocateur who was notorious for teasing his interviewers by expressing views that he may not have actually held (Lyon). Be that as it may, I think Borges's argument is as interesting and potentially insightful as it is spectacularly flawed. It is important to be clear, though, about what is at stake. It is uncontroversial that the written literary tradition in Euskera is modest and of mostly recent vintage. To invoke a preferred metaphor when speaking of minority literatures, it is "invisible" in that it has been produced, distributed, and read on such a limited scale that most writers working in the language find it a challenge to connect with readers, to say nothing of actually earning a living from their work. Only very recently have a few authors who work primarily in Euskera begun to garner the attention of an international reading public.⁴

The invisibility trope, is, to be sure, a staple of any academic discussion of minority literatures. But its use need not be limited to buttressing discussions of the demographic, material, and institutional constraints that determine how minority literatures are produced and disseminated. As interesting and relevant as these articulations of literary invisibility might be, they do not exhaust the power of the trope to characterize the distinctive situation of Basque literature. Indeed, I shall argue in the pages that follow that we might also think of the relative invisibility of the Basque literary tradition in an altogether different register, one that could be regarded as properly structural, if not metaphysical. A key feature of this approach—and I can do no more than briefly sketch it in the pages that follow—is that it not only opens up the possibility of developing a distinctive hermeneutics of Basque literature but that it in fact obliges us to do so. Ironically enough, I shall argue that Borges himself has provided us with some of the valuable resources required by a hermeneutic that would render a previously invisible literature visible.⁵

Not only, however, will I draw upon Borges to develop such a strategy for reading. I will suggest that it can be applied in two different, complementary directions: not only as a mechanism for bringing literary texts written in Euskera into dialog with other world literatures but, perhaps more interestingly, as a tool for identifying hitherto unsuspected texts that may rightly be regarded as having a legitimate place in the Basque literary canon. If Borges took it upon himself to denigrate with impish perversity the cultural contributions of the Basques in his own literary works and interviews, I shall return the favor by limiting my examples of an unexpectedly expansive Basque canon to Borges himself. In short, I shall argue that if Borges has taught us anything, it is that he himself may profitably be read as a Basque writer.

We may begin by submitting to critical scrutiny a principle that is frequently invoked in discussions of Basque literature but that has been insufficiently theorized as such: namely, that what we generally mean by "Basque literature" is literature originally written in Euskera.⁶ There are many good reasons, of course, for critics to train their attention upon literary production in the Basque language. And given the frequency with which forms of linguistic and cultural expression in Euskal Herria have been regarded as a proxy for contested social and political values, perhaps we could not have expected it to be otherwise.

But it is not clear that the question of the invisibility of Basque literature is exclusively a function of the workings of literary markets, language policy, and the social dynamics of readership in a demographically

⁴ Mari Jose Olaziregi is perhaps the foremost expert on the publication and diffusion of Basque-language literature. For a brief and readable overview of the contemporary situation of Basque letters, see her chapter on the Basque literary system in her excellent *Waking the Hedgehog* (25-39).

⁵ My approach is thus akin to, but distinct from, the approach pioneered by Deleuze and Guattari in their essay on Kafka and minor literatures. Deleuze and Guattari do not conceive minor literatures in terms of the cultural expression of demographic minorities that seek a kind of collective identity as such, but rather as an ethical stance: "becoming-minority," as opposed to "becoming fascist."

⁶ This topic is a delicate one and has invited an array of polemical, if not always theoretically informed, treatments. For a classic example, see Guerra Garrido; a more recent article by Bueno Martínez offers a helpful overview of recent Basque authors that publish in Spanish. It is unsurprising that many discussions of Basque writers who work in languages other than Euskera tend to take it for granted that a Basque writer must therefore be characterized by his or her ethnicity, birthplace, or, more broadly, some sort of affective identification with the Basque Country. While such approaches are perhaps not without interest, none of these characteristics have a significant role to play in the discussion that follows.

limited language. Indeed, I would claim that we can no more identify Basque literature *tout court* with literature written in Euskera than we could claim that the *Popol Vuh* needed to have been written in Mayan glyphs and not the Latin alphabet in order to count as an authentic expression of Highland Guatemalan culture. In an important sense, Basque literature may be read as a kind of interstitial literature, occupying a unique aesthetic and ideological position between, for instance, the literatures of Spain and France and, perhaps to a more limited extent, the literatures of Spanish America, the United States and other spaces of the Basque diaspora. Often hidden between and beneath the more prominent literatures attached to politically autonomous states, the identification of Basque literature as such requires that we develop a distinctive hermeneutic that cannot be reduced to a strategy for reading literary works originally composed in Euskera, since its interstitial status raises the possibility that it may take other linguistic forms while continuing to be distinctively Basque in important ways.

A properly theoretical approach to the question of Basque literature's literary and cultural "invisibility" is suggested by Borges's own thought experiment. His reference to two essentially indistinguishable worlds—one with Basques, one without—recalls a classic problem of metaphysics which goes back at least as far as Leibniz, and which Borges himself had memorably exploited in a literary form. Roughly, the claim is this: if two given objects x and y have all properties in common such that any property that may be predicated of x may also be predicated of y (and vice versa), then it follows that x and y are identical.⁷

This principle, sometimes known as the "identity of indiscernibles," was memorably invoked in Borges's short story, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," which arguably provides us with its definitive literary exploration. Borges's text, which has become a staple of high-level discussions of literary theory and the philosophy of art, surveys the literary output of a fictitious author, Pierre Menard, assaying both his "visible work" [*obra visible*] and what the narrator regards as its invisible counterpart (*Obras* 1.446). The story's interest to literary theorists and philosophers hinges primarily on the nature of the latter. A fictional twentieth-century French author, Borges's Menard had set himself to the task of writing his own *Don Quixote*. Menard was not at all interested in copying Cervantes's work but rather in rewriting it, making use of exactly the same words originally used by his more famous predecessor, but arriving at the text of the *Quixote* by means of his own experiences and unique historical circumstances. Menard manages in this way to compose, the narrator informs us, the ninth and thirty-eighth chapter of the first part of *Don Quixote*, along with a fragment of chapter twenty two (1.446).

The difference between Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and that of Menard, we are told, could not be more stark. The reader is invited to consider the following passage from Cervantes's work. Here we have, the narrator opines, fairly boilerplate prose from early seventeenth-century Spain: "truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, archive of actions, witness to the past, exemplar and counsel to the present, a warning of things to come" (1.449).⁸

The narrator then enjoins us to compare Cervantes's florid but empty rhetoric with Menard's boldly pragmatic vision of truth: "truth, whose mother is history, emulator/rival of time, archive of actions, witness to the past, exemplar and counsel to the present, a warning of things to come" (1.449). The contrast between the two passages, the narrator insists, could not be greater:

History, the *mother* of truth; the idea is astonishing. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an inquiry into reality but as the origin of reality itself. For him, historical truth is not what happened; it is what we judge to have

⁷ In formal logic, the principle may be expressed as $\forall F(Fx \leftrightarrow Fy) \rightarrow x=y$. See Forrest for a succinct overview of the principle, its history, and its variants.

⁸ "la verdad, cuya madre es la historia, émula del tiempo, depósito de las acciones, testigo de lo pasado, ejemplo y aviso de lo presente, advertencia de lo por venir."

happened. The final phrases—‘exemplar and counsel to the present, warning of things to come’—are shamelessly pragmatic. (1.449; italics in original)⁹

Borges’s story has been described as a significant contribution to the philosophy of art because it raises the possibility that the problem of indiscernible counterparts—two works that exactly resemble each other in every respect yet differ radically in meaning—may be used as a methodological device for properly framing the problem of the ontology of the work of art.¹⁰ However, we might also make use of Borges’s wry comment about the superfluity of Basques with an eye toward an analogous problem. Even if the two worlds—one with Basques, one without—were on some level indistinguishable, would it follow that they were in fact the same? Even if we were to grant, as Borges supposes we must, that the cultural contributions, including the literary achievements, of the Basques have been difficult to descry when compared with, say, the more celebrated accomplishments of the Jews, the Greeks, the French, or the English, must we therefore conclude that the relative invisibility of Basque cultural achievements somehow constitutes a deficiency, a proof of insignificance? Or might it be possible to think about the Basque literary tradition in a wholly different way, perhaps akin to Menard’s relationship to the *Quixote*, one that demands an altogether different strategy for reading?

The problem of the structural invisibility of Basque literature exactly parallels the problem of the structural invisibility of the Basque nation itself. To many observers, particularly those for whom the currently existing geopolitical map has become naturalized and thus essentially timeless, it has seemed axiomatically true that the Basque Country is just *ipso facto* a region in Spain and France. In the same way, it has been taken to be obviously true of writers such as Pío Baroja and Unamuno that write in Spanish and were born citizens of the Spanish state that they are “Spanish” in a straightforward way that precludes their laying claim to any other national and ethnic identities.¹¹ However, we need not read Basque literature according to the same political coordinates that constitute our current geopolitical grid precisely because that grid does not allow for the representation of the kind of invisible literatures and invisible nations that are at issue.

This same logic of invisibility has been alluded to by Bernardo Atxaga in a brief statement that, perhaps as well as any other, has come to define the complex conceptual space occupied by contemporary Basque writers: “these days nothing can be said to be peculiar to one place or person,” he writes, in a text that appears in the Spanish translation of *Obabakoak*: “The world is everywhere and Euskal Herria is no longer just Euskal Herria but [...] the place where the world takes the name of Euskal Herria” (324). We are no longer entitled, Atxaga suggests, to claim that the visible markers of Basque identity—whether they be social, political, cultural, or linguistic—may be clearly and unambiguously distinguished from other such markers belonging to other groups. Rather, any claims to cultural particularity are necessarily grounded in broader constellations of cultural expression and cannot be told apart from the latter by means of

⁹ “La historia, *madre* de la verdad; la idea es asombrosa. Menard, contemporáneo de William James, no define la historia como una indagación de la realidad sino como su origen. La verdad histórica, para él, no es lo que sucedió; es lo que juzgamos que sucedió. Las cláusulas finales—*ejemplo y aviso de lo presente, advertencia de lo por venir*—son descaradamente pragmáticas” (italics in original).

¹⁰ The idea is that, by removing any empirical or observational data from the equation, we are obliged to articulate a theory of the artwork that takes into account the possibility that the work—say, one of Duchamp’s snowshovels—may exactly resemble an ordinary thing—say, the tool hanging unused in my garage—while nonetheless belonging to a distinct metaphysical category. By controlling for mere happenstance—i.e., the exact coincidence of empirical details—we are forced to deal with art on a properly theoretical level. The use of this particular methodological tool in the field of aesthetics has been pioneered by Arthur Danto. For a detailed working out of his theory, see his *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, one of the most important recent contributions to the philosophy of art. For Danto’s explicit reflections on Borges, see chapter two.

¹¹ Unamuno presents us with a fascinating case study that can only briefly be mentioned here. His fervent *españolismo* was no doubt nourished by the denial of his application for the chair of Basque Studies at the Instituto de Bilbao, even if he had begun to explore anti-Basque themes before ever submitting his application. It is indeed almost impossible not to read his subsequent over-identification with the Spanish state as a kind of overcompensation for his troubled relationship to his own Basque roots. Of course it could be argued there is perhaps something very Basque about his mis-timing of his love affair with Spain: he came to be obsessed with it at just the time it was ceasing to exist as a world power and his love could thus only take the form of a peculiar nostalgia, much in the same way that certain strains of Basque nationalism have sometimes seemed to emerge tragically—or comically—“too late,” forever tinged with nostalgia for a misremembered past.

simple inspection. In the same way that we cannot tell the difference between Cervantes's *Quixote* and Menard's creation simply by looking at the two (since they are, to all appearances, identical), we cannot necessarily tell the difference between expressions of Basque and "non-Basque" culture—as opposed, say, to quintessential expressions of national cultures underwritten by the Spanish and French states—by means of any simple inspection. We cannot rely upon a cursory review of a text, the identification of its language of composition or the tropes that it employs in order to determine its national character. Rather, Atxaga's suggestion is that the Basque Country must then be understood as a particular inflection of the world from which it is inseparable, rather than an autonomous, freestanding array of cultural traits.

In what does this peculiarly Basque inflection of the world consist? It is significant that Atxaga's claim that a new strategy is required for demarcating the space of Euskal Herria is embedded in *Obabakoak*, the literary text that, perhaps more than any other, has come to be regarded as the definitive expression of late twentieth-century Basque letters for many readers both inside and outside of Euskal Herria. One of the chief virtues of *Obabakoak* is its willingness to frame this question in a text that freely mingles practice—an expertly composed miscellany of stories—with theory, namely ruminations on not only how to write in general but, more specifically, how to elaborate a Basque literary tradition from meager resources. In the brief text entitled "How to Plagiarize," Atxaga's narrator has a dream in which he converses with Axular, the seventeenth-century giant of Basque letters, and is given explicit advice on how to write from a historically underdeveloped literary tradition. The key, Axular tells him, is to help himself to plots and storylines belonging to others. The production of a literary history, it turns out, is less a matter of original creation than a matter of the skillful and bold appropriation of material that is already, as it were, in the public domain. As Axular tells his protégé, "we writers don't create anything new, we're all continually writing the same stories. [...] The world today is nothing but a vast Alexandria and we who live in it merely write commentaries on what has already been created, nothing more" (271).

If the world itself is a vast library—certainly a Borgesian trope if ever there was one—then to create is in some sense to read creatively. It follows that this Basque inflection of the world is not primarily concerned with cultivating a unique set of themes or topics or, for that matter, developing a unique set of expressive tools. Rather, this inflection is a strategy for reading and freely appropriating materials from other national traditions: to write Basque literature is to read literature as if it were already Basque. This I take to be the point of Atxaga's observation that Euskal Herria is the place where the world takes on the name of Euskal Herria: the Basque Country does not so much offer us a unique set of themes, concerns, and preoccupations as a strategy for reading, a position from which to read.

Of course we cannot miss the Borgesian aspects of Atxaga's proposal here: Axular's injunction to appropriate the words of other traditions and authors is nothing less than an invitation to follow the practice that Borges had already commended to us through Pierre Menard. To write is not to create, but to appropriate material, to reclaim and repurpose it. It follows that, as Borges's Pierre Menard shows us, the material is invariably transfigured and transformed, even when, in an extreme case such as that of Menard himself, it remains to all appearances identical to the "source material" with which it corresponds. The particular inflection that it takes on is not to be found in the text itself, as it were, but the conditions and circumstances of its transmission and reception.

Consider what Pierre Menard has to teach us about how these conditions and circumstances may unfold. While critical discussion of the story has long focused on the theoretical issues raised by the indistinguishable texts created by Cervantes and Menard, somewhat less attention has been given to the ways in which the texts dramatize the struggle between competing national literatures, produced by competing nation-states. Menard is, our narrator suggests, a quintessentially French writer whose work is defined by all the standard points of reference of the French literary world (or at least the points of references that a well-read Argentine writer such as Borges might have posited): "a symbolist of Nîmes, special devotee of Poe, who begat Baudelaire, who begat Mallarmé, who begat Valéry, who begat

Edmond Teste" (1.447).¹² Menard chooses the *Quixote* for his project precisely because it does not seem to him to be an essential literary work, one without which the universe would have been unimaginable, as the universe would have been unimaginable without Poe (1.447-48).

We should not miss the point of this subtle dig. This comical—dare we say stereotypically?—French gesture on the part of Menard that grudgingly acknowledges the interest of *Don Quixote* while immediately dismissing the highest achievement of Spanish letters as an “inessential” work is not just a bit of sly one-upmanship on the part of a writer from a rival literary tradition. It is rather a preliminary hint at the logic of disavowal that is at work in the story. In an important sense, the *Quixote* can only be made available for the French literary tradition once it has been divested of its prosaic Spanish elements and reconfigured accordingly to an essentially French framework. “Menard’s fragmentary *Quixote* is more subtle than that of Cervantes,” the narrator observes. “The latter crudely sets his tales of chivalry against the impoverished provincial reality of his country; Menard selects as his ‘reality’ the land of Carmen during the century of Lepanto and Lope” (1.448).¹³

The contrast between the provincial character of Cervantes’ description and the more exotic world evoked by Menard is a magnificent example of the methodology of indiscernible counterparts, since the interpretive frame itself is solely responsible for distinguishing one work from another, given that the passages in question are verbally identical. But the passage also suggests that the logic of indiscernible counterparts is at the same time supplemented by a political and cultural logic that supplants the “humble provincial reality” of the Spanish work in favor of “the land of Carmen” of the French one. The latter reference is not without significance: Mérimée’s elaboration of the Carmen figure is already a French appropriation and transformation of an ostensibly Spanish figure.¹⁴ It is as if the French literary tradition that Menard represents could only digest Cervantes’s text once it had passed through a French interpretive frame and this frame in turn could only accept Carmen as a prototypically Spanish character once she had been properly articulated as such in Mérimée’s French libretto.

As rich as this logic of disavowal, displacement, and transference is in “Pierre Menard,” we should note that it is not exhausted by these competing French and Spanish interpretive frames. Indeed, the very functioning of the logic of disavowal should sensitize us to the possibility that it may yet function in other ways, ways that are not visible, as it were, on the surface of the text itself. As we have seen, Menard’s composition of the *Quixote* is predicated upon a gesture of misreading and disavowal. In Bloomian fashion Borges clears a space for a “new” text to be created; this is done in large measure through the *sokatira* between the French and Spanish literary traditions, traditions which are underwritten by their corresponding, sometimes rival nation-states. Just as the political map as currently defined by the powers that be is not prepared to accommodate any other aspiring nations that might yet stake a claim to political sovereignty, the literary spaces of “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” are likewise predicated upon a misreading of the literary-political map that has not provided a place for additional non-state literary and political actors.

My point is not that Borges might have exercised an influence on Atxaga: that much is not in question. There is an obvious sense in which any writer who follows Borges is a post-Borgesian writer, including

¹² “[...] un simbolista de Nimes, devoto esencialmente de Poe, que engendró a Baudelaire, que engendró a Mallarmé, que engendró a Valéry, que engendró a Edmond Teste.”

¹³ “El fragmentario *Quijote* de Menard es más sutil que el de Cervantes. Este, de un modo burdo, opone a las ficciones caballerescas la pobre realidad provinciana de su país; Menard elige como ‘realidad’ la tierra de Carmen durante el siglo de Lepanto y de Lope.”

¹⁴ For a marvelous illustration of the vertiginous logic of these competing re- and mis-appropriations of national cultures, one would be hard pressed to improve on Carlos Saura’s 1983 film version of *Carmen*. Saura’s versión of the story may be read as a Spanish attempt to reappropriate Mérimée’s (French) telling of the story of the (invented) Andalusian character (who is taken to be metonymically “Spanish”). In one interesting scene, renowned flamenco guitarist Paco de Lucía listens to a tape recording of an aria from *Carmen* and attempts to transpose the recorded arrangement to the medium of flamenco guitar, effectively “translating” the piece back into its “original” idiom. Of course, as Saura’s film makes clear, it makes no sense to speak of an “original” version of the story and that the work’s “authenticity” is simply a function of the skill with which the piece is appropriated, rather than its ostensible lack of any precursor.

those that most vigorously attempt to resist his influence, even if Atxaga's affinities with his Argentine counterpart are indeed intriguing.¹⁵ A rather more interesting enterprise would be to read Borges as an "Atxagian" writer, or at least one that exemplifies certain Basque sensibilities. While the claim may sound far-fetched, it can be bolstered by means of an influential argument that was famously advanced by Borges himself in the brief essay, "Kafka and his Precursors."

Borges had there advanced the claim that the kind of causality at stake in the history of literature is not of a piece with any kind of scientific (or, for that matter, ordinary) causality, in which the cause temporally precedes the effect. On the contrary, with regard to the history of literature, we could say that the literary effect precedes the cause. The essay, which has become an important reference point in contemporary criticism and has even been invoked in recent work in political theory (Žižek, *Less than Nothing* 209), makes the case that the meaning of a writer's work only receives its fullest articulation in the texts of his or her successors, in all their unpredictable heterogeneity. By way of illustration, Borges asks us to consider an apparently disparate array of tropes and texts drawn from literary history, broadly conceived: Zeno's paradoxes, Han Yu's ninth-century reflections on the unicorn, Kierkegaard's parable about how a supremely difficult religious pilgrimage may have its essential conditions so modified that even an everyday errand may qualify as fulfilling it, Leon Bloy's description of inveterate collectors of travel memorabilia that never leave home. What do all these things have in common? Borges draws the following conclusion:

If I am not mistaken, the stories I have enumerated all recall something of Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of these stories are similar to each other. In each of these texts we find Kafka's idiosyncrasy, to a greater or lesser extent, but if Kafka had never written, we would not be able to see it; in other words, it wouldn't exist. [...] The fact is that every writer *creates* his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, just as it must modify the future. (*Obras* 2.89-90; italics in original)

It is important to be clear about the strength of Borges's claim. The point is not simply that a writer like Kafka makes us aware of hitherto unsuspected connections between diverse writers; it is that Kafka's own works bring those connections into being. This has nothing to do with literary "influence" as we normally think of it. Rather, Borges is making the more robust case for backward causation in the realm of literary interpretation: the effect (Zeno, Han Yu, Kierkegaard) temporally precedes the cause (Kafka).

Once we have allowed the argument that literary influence need not be a matter of chronology—and the corollary that the literary system as such does not require that one writer even be aware of another in order for that influence to be causally efficacious—we are in a position to ask how Borges might himself be read as a Basque writer. What would it mean to read Borges, not as a precursor, but as a successor to writers such as Bernardo Atxaga and Ramon Saizarbitoria and in the light of a set of particularly Basque sensibilities and interpretive questions that might not otherwise have arisen?¹⁶

In a word, the question is: what would a Basque reading of Borges look like? For simplicity's sake, let us limit our discussion to that same text that has served as touchstone throughout this study, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*." Given both the theoretical issues that arise regarding indiscernible

¹⁵ See Olaziregi's *Waking the Hedgehog*, which notes in passing a number of commonalities, implicit and explicit, between Borges and Atxaga. For an argument that both Borges and Atxaga deploy similar strategies for writing from the perspective of a minority literature, see Faber.

¹⁶ The exercise is not, I think, an idle one. In addition to the example I go on to discuss above, I think it would be interesting, for example, to read Saizarbitoria's *Ehun metro* (*One Hundred Meters*) in this way. On the one hand, one could imagine a reading of the *novella* that calls attention to how the asymptotic structure of the work recalls certain features of Borges's appropriation of Zeno, particularly in stories such as "Death and the Compass." More interesting still, though, would be a Saizarbitorian reading—sharpened by an examination of the legal and extralegal character of violence in his work—of Borges's famous short story. It would be interesting to see how reading Borges after Saizarbitoria might make us more sensitized to the political and juridical dimensions (rarely noticed by Borges's readers) implicit in the quasi-mathematical features of Borges's famous text.

counterparts and the tension between competing national and political actors in the story, how might a sensitization to—if we may borrow Mark Kurlansky’s famous phrase—a uniquely “Basque history of the world” complicate the reading of the text that we have developed?

Although to the best of my knowledge the point has never been discussed by critics working from the perspective of other literary traditions, “Pierre Menard” conceals on its very surface a hidden literary and political topology that is undeniably Basque, and that is perhaps all the more potent for its subtlety, since the clue that the story provides to it is so nondescript. To identify the invisible fulcrum around which Cervantes’s and Menard’s rivalry turns—a proxy, to be sure, for the rivalries of competing national and literary actors—is to identify the suppressed element which makes this confrontation possible in the first place. The clue, I think, to a Basque reading of Borges is to be found in Menard’s letter to the story’s narrator. This is the missive that informs the narrator of Menard’s “simply astonishing” ambition of writing his own *Quixote*. It is sent, we are told, on September 30, 1934 from Bayonne (1.446). It is far from clear that this apparently minor detail—included, it might seem, merely to enhance the text’s verisimilitude—may be safely disregarded. On the contrary, it has become axiomatic in Borges criticism to note that even the smallest and apparently least consequential details may play a much more significant role in the interpretation of the story than they might at first glance appear.

What is the significance of announcing this quixotic enterprise from Bayonne, of all places? The city of course, has long been one of the most important cities of Iparralde, or the French Basque Country, with its coastal location giving it a privileged position as a site for international commerce. It has also historically been at the epicenter of Basque nationalism in France and continues to retain a distinctively Basque character up to this day (cf. Woodworth 253-56). Of course these crucial features of Bayonne go hand in hand: far from being opposed, the outward-looking and cosmopolitan character of the city has served in important ways to license the Basque nationalist movement in France—modest as it is—precisely because its openness to extra-national influences and contacts has undoubtedly played a role in emboldening Basque nationalists to seek greater juridical recognition of the Basque territories in the highly centralized French state.

The time frame of the letter is not without some interest as well. As Cameron Watson has noted, the period between the first and second world wars was marked in Iparralde by the “first stirrings of a specifically politico-cultural Basque nationalist movement” (222).¹⁷ Furthermore, the specific date of the letter is of some interest too, coinciding exactly with the foundation of *Aintzina*, a newspaper founded by Pierre Lafitte, the father of contemporary French Basque nationalism.¹⁸ Having founded the Euskalerriste movement in 1933, Lafitte used *Aintzina* as an organ to promote and defend a vision of Basque culture that hinged on traditional rural values. Although the paper ceased publication three years later¹⁹—and the gains for Basque nationalism that Lafitte could claim were quite modest—the period was a decisive one in helping the nationalist cause to take hold in Iparralde in its articulation of a set of Basque nationalist values even if they differed in interesting ways from Spanish Basque preoccupations.²⁰

What is the significance of these apparently trivial details? From one vantage point, very little. One might regard Bayonne as simply one location in France that is no more and no less serviceable than any other French town for serving as the site for Menard to lay out his project. Certainly, this is the kind of detail that a French or Spanish reader would have passed over without a second thought: “Bayonne” would not

¹⁷ The Basque nationalist movement, while undeniably weaker in Iparralde—due, in large measure, to a highly centralized national government—has consequently received less critical attention than its Spanish cousin. For a brief orientation, see Watson (222-37; 376-412) and, for a more in-depth treatment, Jacob.

¹⁸ The first issue of *Aintzina* appeared in October 1934, shortly after an announcement had appeared regarding the founding of the paper (Jacob 80).

¹⁹ It is worth noting, however, that it eventually resumed publication in 1942 under Pierre Larzabal and Marc Légasse (Watson 233).

²⁰ The Basque nationalist movement in France was more culture-driven and politically and socially conservative than were its counterparts in Spain, so much so that coverage of the Spanish Civil War was almost entirely absent from the paper (Watson 231; Jacob 82).

be taken as a semiotically charged sign, and certainly not one having any political import. The detail might only be taken to be significant insofar as it contributes something to what Roland Barthes called “l’effet de réel,” a way of generating a sort of “reality effect” without reference to any further purpose.

It is important to note, however, another possibility that is open to us as well. The previous sort of reading—in which “Bayonne” is taken to be a more or less neutral, unmarked synecdoche of “France”—already takes for granted that the literary traditions of Spain and France, like the states associated with those traditions, have already overdetermined the social, political, and cultural possibilities for expression in that part of the world. If “Bayonne” is taken to be just one more indifferent location in France, there is nothing more to be said.

It is far from clear, however, that the point may be dismissed so quickly. The point is not just that a Basque reader may find significance where another reader might not, although this in and of itself is not insignificant. It is that Bayonne—precisely insofar as it is a peculiarly Basque space that has resisted total absorption into the orbit of Paris and Francophone culture—has a structural role to play in mediating the encounter of competing Spanish and French literary traditions. Indeed, Bayonne could be seen to play the role of something akin to what Žižek has called a “vanishing mediator,” a term whose function is not to enter directly into the mediation of two conflicting concepts, but rather which is indispensable in facilitating such an encounter, even if it remains, as it were, invisible and not directly representable in itself (*For They Know Not* 182-97).²¹

My suggestion, then, is that in the case of “Pierre Menard,” the rivalry between the Spanish and French literary traditions turns on a minimal point, a nearly invisible fulcrum, which facilitates the encounter between these competing traditions but, having done so, vanishes, remaining invisible even while its structural role is essential. To read “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” from “that place where the world takes the name of Euskal Herria” is precisely to see Borges’s world from this distinct vantage point, where an apparently throwaway reference to the most important city of Iparralde turns out to be not so innocent after all. Indeed, we might say that this Basque subtext is absolutely essential to the text in its own way, not despite of its lack of visibility but, in a way, because of it. The dramatization of competing Spanish and French literary identities is predicated upon the effacement of the third—Basque—term.

What does it mean, finally, to read Borges as a Basque writer, at least with regard to “Pierre Menard”? Certainly, what I have been arguing for as an irreducibly Basque dimension of the text is not a function of language per se, nor, for the matter, Borges’s own affective disposition toward Basque culture, generally, nor his ethnic heritage (although more on that below). The standard to be met in determining whether such a reading can be sustained is not contingent on any particular empirical fact about language, affect, or ethnicity. Rather, it must remain a question to be settled on the level of interpretation itself, without appeal to external supports. Consider the concluding lines of “Pierre Menard,” in which the author muses how Pierre Menard’s method for composition might also make for a new interpretive principle:

Menard (perhaps without trying to do so) has enriched the patient and rudimentary art of reading by means of a new technique: the technique of deliberate anachronism and erroneous attribution. This infinitely malleable device invites us to read the *Odyssey* as if it came after the *Aeneid* and the *Le jardin du Centaure* by Madame Henri Bachelier as if it were by Madame Henri Bachelier. This technique turns the most ordinary of books into an adventure. Isn’t attributing the *Imitation of Christ* to Louis Ferdinand Céline or James Joyce a sufficient renewal of those worthless spiritual counsels? (*Obras* 1.450).²²

²¹ The comparison is inexact and of course Žižek’s point is far more subtle than I can do justice to here. But the comparison, I hope, is not unhelpful.

²² “Menard (acaso sin quererlo) ha enriquecido mediante una técnica nueva el arte detenido y rudimentario de la lectura: la técnica del anacronismo deliberado y de las atribuciones erróneas. Esa técnica de aplicación infinita nos insta a recorrer la Odisea como si fuera posterior a la Eneida y el libro *Le jardin du Centaure* de Madame Henri Bachelier como si fuera de Madame Henri Bachelier.

Whether or not Borges may be considered a Basque writer is a question only to be answered by the fruitfulness of adopting just such a strategy of reading, its proof residing only in strength of the interpretations that emerge from it. I hope to have shown that such a way of reading—from that unique place where the world takes on the name of Euskal Herria—is a rich way of reading indeed.

CODA

Borges's final resting place may be found in the Cimetière des Rois in Geneva, Switzerland, a city where he had spent the crucial formative years of his adolescence. His tombstone is inscribed with lines of Old English and Old Norse—passions of the elderly Borges—as well as an inscription from his wife and literary executor, María Kodama, that reads: “De Ulrica a Javier Otárola.” The latter are the names of the characters from Borges's late story, “Ulrica,” which deals with the relationship between an elderly Colombian professor and a young Scandinavian woman, a not terribly well disguised allusion to his relationship with Kodama. It is perhaps not insignificant that the private name, the secret name, by which Borges made himself known to his wife was an ostensibly Basque one, even as everything else about his latter years—his burial in Switzerland, his lifelong Anglophilia, his obsession with all things Norse and Scandinavian—suggested a writer whose interests were not easily circumscribed by any single tradition, and certainly not a Basque one, nor, for that matter, a Spanish, French, or even Argentine one. There is no contradiction here: the traces of Borges's own Basque roots that tend to manifest themselves in oblique and unexpected ways do not only give the lie to the claim that a world without Basques would be exactly like the world with them. They also suggest that those roots are so entangled with the threads of other national cultural traditions that they are, at least in some cases, inseparable from them.

I began this study by citing excerpts of interviews in which Borges appeared to denigrate Basque culture as a thing of ultimately scant consequence. But it must be noted that, even while repeatedly suggesting that Basque contributions to world culture were so minimal as to be invisible, Borges unfailingly pointed out in those same interviews that he too was of Basque heritage. “I have a great deal of Basque blood,” he told one interviewer (“yo tengo bastante sangre vasca”) [Neustadt], even as he affirmed to another that he was “half Basque” (“medio vasco”) [Briante 45].²³ By his own reasoning, then, we might conclude that if the Basques have given us nothing else, they have, at least, given us Borges.

Esa técnica puebla de aventura los libros más calmosos. Atribuir a Louis Ferdinand Céline o a James Joyce la *Imitación de Cristo* ¿no es una suficiente renovación de esos tenues avisos espirituales?”

²³ In yet another interview, conducted by Blanca Berastegui, he pointed out, “I have four or five close last names that are just as Basque as yours” (“yo tengo cuatro o cinco apellidos cercanos tan vascos como el suyo”) [Berastegui 175].

Works Cited

- Atxaga, Bernardo. *Obabakoak*. Trans. Margaret Jull Costa. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- Barthes, Roland. "L'Effet de Réel." *Communications* 11.11 (1968): 84-89.
- Berastegui, Blanca. "Jorge Luis Borges." *Gente de palabra: 37 personajes entrevistados*. Barcelona: Plaza & Janes, 1987. 173-79.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Obras completas*. 4 vols. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1989.
- Briante, Miguel. "Jorge Luis Borges habla de los demás (II parte)." *Confirmado* [Buenos Aires] 21 Jan 1970. 42-45.
- Bueno Martínez, María. "Quince años de literatura vasca en castellano (1985-2000)." *Revista Internacional de Estudios Vascos* 47.1 (2002): 11-34.
- Carmen*. Dir. Carlos Saura. Criterion. 1983. DVD.
- Danto, Arthur. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986.
- Diament, Mario. "Borges y los judíos." *Borges: Dos palabras ante de morir y otras entrevistas*. Comp. Fernando Mateo. Buenos Aires: LC, 1994. 43-51.
- Espejo, Miguel and Carlos Dámaso Martínez. "Jorge Luis Borges: 'Soy un escritor y quizás un poeta'." *Clarín* 16 Jun 1988. 8.
- Faber, Sebastiaan. "El mundo está en todas partes: la subversión fantástica de Jorge Luis Borges y Bernardo Atxaga." *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 28.3 (2004): 519-39.
- Forrest, Peter. "The Identity of Indiscernibles." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward N. Zalta. Web. May 20, 2013.
- Guerra Garrido, Raúl. "La literatura vasca en castellano (1939-1984)." *Revista Internacional de Estudios Vascos* 30.1 (1985): 63-76.
- Jacob, James E. *Hills of Conflict: Basque Nationalism in France*. Reno, NV: U of Nevada P, 1994.
- Lyon, Ted. "Jorge Luis Borges and the Interview as Literary Genre." *Latin American Literary Review* 22.44 (1994): 74-89.
- Neustadt, Bernardo. "Se llama Borges: se le perdona todo... hasta su racismo." *Revista Extra* 12.133 (July 1976). Web. May 13, 2013.
- Olaziregi Alustiza, Mari Jose. "Literatura vasca en Europa." *Los vascos en Europa*. Ed. V.M. Amado and S. Pablo. Vitoria-Gasteiz: Sancho El Sabio, 2001. 125-55.
- . *Waking the Hedgehog: The Literary Universe of Bernardo Atxaga*. Trans. Amaia Gabantxo. Reno, NV: Center for Basque Studies, 2005.
- Watson, Cameron. *Modern Basque History: Eighteenth Century to the Present*. Reno, NV: Center for Basque Studies, 2003.
- Woodworth, Paddy. *The Basque Country: A Cultural History*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008.
- Zizek, Slavoj. *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. New York: Verso, 1991.
- . *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. New York: Verso, 2012.