JUST PLAY ALONG:
Exploring Metafictional Games in Works of Cervantes, Borges, and Auster

AMBER LORENZ
HAVERFORD COLLEGE CLASS OF 2017

Senior Thesis in Comparative Literature
Professor María Cristina Quintero
Professor Maud McInerney
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‘Why does it disturb us that Don Quixote be a reader of the Quixote and Hamlet a spectator of Hamlet? I believe I have found the reason: these inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious … the history of the universe is an infinite sacred book that all men write and read and try to understand, and in which they are also written.”

—Jorge Luis Borges, “Partial Magic in the Quixote”
INTRODUCTION

Reading fiction is a familiar and, in many cases, comfortable activity. For a reader to settle in to read a novel, they must accept the conventions of fiction and suspend their disbelief for the sake of the story. This is usually an easy task—after the cover page, the author slips into the background and a nameless consciousness takes over to tell the tale. Although the reader will always know that what they are reading is fictional, for the time being, it is possible to push that knowledge to the back of the mind and become as invested in the story as if it were real.

In the genre of metafiction, however, the reader cannot fall into this sense of comfort and familiarity—they cannot forget that they are reading fiction. In her book Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction, Patricia Waugh defines *metafiction* as “a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). Reading metafictional texts, readers must consider and reconsider how the story does or does not relate to the real world. The act of reading becomes far more unsettling, but potentially far more interesting. Waugh claims:

...it can be argued not only that literary fiction is a form of play (if a very sophisticated form) but that play is an important and necessary aspect of human society. ... ‘What we need is not great works but playful ones. ... A story is a game someone has played so you can play it too.’ (34)

Fiction in general is a form of play; what happens when that play is acknowledged as pretend, but the story forges ahead anyway?

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1 In this essay, I will use the pronoun *they* in lieu of *he or she* to refer to any single individual in the third person whose gender and pronouns have not been established. This choice, while grammatically awkward for some readers, is a conscious decision on my part to unsubscribe from the gender binary.
In this paper, I will be performing an exploratory analysis of some of the works of Miguel de Cervantes, Jorge Luis Borges, and Paul Auster. While there are many authors of metafiction, I chose these three in particular because of the striking and explicit way that they enter into conversation with one another across a span of over three centuries. Cervantes wrote the elaborately playful novel *Don Quixote* in 1605, one that would raise all manner of questions about authorship and fiction’s relationship to reality; over three hundred years later, Jorge Luis Borges would enter the scene and complicate many of those same questions with his puzzling and provocative short stories; finally, several decades later, Paul Auster would write the short novel *City of Glass* as the first installation of *The New York Trilogy* and push the same kind of metafictional games even further into the extreme. I will begin with an analysis of Cervantes’ seminal text and move forward through time, introducing Borges and later Auster into the conversation.

These three authors all seem to write with similar questions in mind: Who—or what—gives a story its meaning? Who is “in charge” of constructing meaning in a text—the author, or the reader? Who dictates what the “correct” interpretation of a work is? How do stories, and writing in general, fit into the world around us? Are there rules for writing fiction, and if so, what are they? What is the point of writing?

**CERVANTES AND METAFICTION**

*DON QUIXOTE*

Frequently heralded as the first “modern” novel (as we conceive of the concept today), *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes can also be said to be one of the first important models of
what we have come to call metafiction, and therefore the inspiration for metafictional works such as Jorge Luis Borges’ short stories and the novel *City of Glass* by Paul Auster. Cervantes plays with the reader in various ways—even in just the first few chapters of his lengthy novel—and in the process, *Don Quixote* sparks many interesting questions about the potential dangers of literature, and the relationships between author and reader, between fiction and reality.

The premise of the story itself plays with these questions and relationships. The protagonist, Don Quixote, is an avid reader, particularly of stories of chivalry. He is so involved in the stories he reads that he often longs to write them himself:

> But, even so, he praised the author for having concluded his book with the promise of unending adventure, and he often felt the desire to take up his pen and give it the conclusion promised there; and no doubt he would have done so, and even published it, if other greater and more persistent thoughts had not prevented him from doing so. (20)

Don Quixote, as reader, constructs (or longs to construct, as he never gets around to it) his own endings to the books he reads. He begins to confuse the line between reality and the stories he consumes: “His fantasy filled with everything he had read in his books … [and] for him no

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2 Although “metafiction” has been thought of as a postmodern technique, many of its characteristics are clearly found in *Don Quixote*.


4 “Pero, con todo, alababa en su autor aquel acabar su libro con la promesa de aquella inacabable aventura, y muchas veces le vino deseo de tomar la pluma, y dalle fin al pie de la letra como allí se promete; y sin duda alguna lo hiciera, y aun saliera con ello, si otros mayores y continuos pensamientos no se lo estorbaran” (29). All future references to the original Spanish of *Don Quijote de la Mancha* will be to this edition edited by Francisco Rico, parenthetically, by page number.

5 All future references of *Don Quixote* in English will be to this edition translated by Edith Grossman, parenthetically, by page number.
history in the world was truer” (21). Don Quixote’s fantasies become more real to him than anything else. He reads with such hunger that at a certain point, reading is no longer enough; he has to live out his favorite works of fiction and become the author and protagonist of his own story of chivalry.

Although he seems to seriously believe that he is a knight and has a commitment to chivalry, he makes very conscious decisions about how to construct his new identity. He fashions himself some rudimentary armor, finds a steed and decides upon a fitting name, and even changes his own name: “...he wanted to give [a name] to himself, and he spent another eight days pondering this, and at last he called himself Don Quixote” (23). In this moment of self-transformation, he becomes the author of his own story; he very mindfully selects a name for the character that he is becoming. To finish off his new identity, he must select a lady (for Don Quixote recognizes that the knights he reads about always have a lady); he remembers a pretty girl with whom he had once been in love, Aldonza Lorenzo—who, it seems, hardly even knows he exists—and he adopts her as a character for his narrative: “...he decided to call her Dulcinea of Toboso, because she came from Toboso, a name, to his mind, that was musical and beautiful and filled with significance” (24). Although he could have just kept her name, he deliberately re-names her so to match her status within his fantasies of chivalry.

With this and every other decision he makes, with every piece he adds to his new identity, Don Quixote compares himself to the knights in his books; he determines to have

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6 “Llenósele la fantasía de todo aquello que leía en los libros... [y] para él no había otra historia más cierta en el mundo” (30).

7 “...quiso ponerse a sí mismo, y en este pensamiento duró otros ocho días, y al cabo se vino a llamar «don Quijote»” (32).

8 “...vino a llamarla «Dulcinea del Toboso» porque era natural del Toboso: nombre a su parecer, músico y peregrino y significativo” (33).
himself dubbed a knight, “as he had read in the books that had brought him to this state” (24).\(^9\) He participates in a very conscious reenactment of what he has read: “He strung these together with other foolish remarks, all in the manner his books had taught him and imitating their language as much as he could” (25).\(^10\) Despite this completely self-aware process, Don Quixote does not seem to realize that he is headed into madness and an inability to tell fiction from reality. He is a flawed reader; his search for a new identity based on what he has read ends up taking control over his entire life.

In the Prologue,\(^11\) the narrator (who we might presume is a fictionalized version of Cervantes) claims that the story actually happened—although he gives the reader the freedom to choose to believe him or not. From the outset, the reader has agency. The narrator describes his struggle to adequately introduce the story of the famous Don Quixote of La Mancha\(^12\) relating the tale as if Don Quixote were a famous historical figure.\(^13\) This is only the first of his many authorial games. Later in the novel, it is claimed that an Arab historian named Cide Hamete Benengeli is the original writer of the story of Don Quixote—the implication being that the fictionalized author is only the editor of the translation—he’s not even the translator. Later, we are told that the original was written in Arabic and that the narrator has had someone else

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\(^9\) “según él había leído en los libros que tal le tenían” (34).

\(^10\) “Con éstos iba ensartando otros disparates, todos al modo de los que sus libros le habían enseñado, imitando en cuanto podía su lenguaje” (36).

\(^11\) Also translated as “Author’s note” in some editions.

\(^12\) “el famoso don Quijote de la Mancha” (14)

\(^13\) Interestingly, I noticed while living in Seville, Spain (where, according to the local lore, Miguel de Cervantes first began to write Don Quixote) for a semester that Don Quixote is almost talked about as if he were a historical figure; it’s like everyone is just playing along with Cervantes and pretending that Don Quixote existed. The same applies to other mythical/fictional figures, such as Don Juan Tenorio and Carmen la cigarilla.
translate it into Spanish. It’s as if Cervantes is dismissing his own authority and giving up his responsibility toward the quality and accuracy of the book. In the prologue, the implied author says, “But though I seem to be the father, I am the stepfather of Don Quixote…” (3). As “stepfather” to Don Quixote—the implication here being that authors are “fathers” of their works—Cervantes wouldn’t have nearly as much responsibility toward the text.

At one point, the narrator mentions that he is skimming over “a few other details … of little importance” (68), and begs the reader not to blame him or the book itself. He says, “If any objection can be raised regarding the truth of this one, it can only be that its author was Arabic, since the people of that nation are very prone to telling falsehoods…” (68). Apart from the moment of racial stereotyping that he inserts here, the narrator is admitting that some of the book that he has been claiming to be historically true may be invented by the author—who is not him. Cervantes is playing conflicting games; he makes the narrator treat Don Quixote as if he really existed, but simultaneously makes references to an Arabic author who may be a liar. Don Quixote is both fictional and nonfictional, in a world that houses both fictional characters and non-fictional characters. Although his readers probably would not be fooled into believing that Don Quixote is really a historical figure, Cervantes forces us to ponder what is real and what is fiction.

14 A contemporary example of the same thing occurs in William Goldman’s The Princess Bride. Every copy you can buy claims to be written by S. Morgenstern and abridged by William Goldman. No unabridged copy exists, and S. Morgenstern is completely made up by the author, William Goldman.

15 “Pero yo, que, aunque parezco padre, soy padrastro de don Quijote…” (7)

16 “algunas menudencias … de poca importancia” (87)

17 “Si a ésta se le puede poner alguna objeción cerca de su verdad, no podrá ser otra sino haber sido su autor arábigo, siendo muy propio de los de aquella nación ser mentirosos…” (88)
Cervantes, at least in the first few chapters, does not allow the reader to get truly comfortable. After the prologue, the narrator character mostly disappears into the background. Apart from a few fleeting allusions to “el autor”, the narrative takes a fairly standard form, the narrator maintaining relative objectivity and relaying the story in a conventional third-person narration. The reader is lulled into a false sense of comfort and familiarity with the narrative—and may even entirely forget about the claims the narrator has made in the prologue (that Don Quixote really existed, that Cervantes may not be the author, etc.). Then, at the very end of Chapter Eight, in the middle of a climactic moment of battle, the narrator disrupts the story: “But the difficulty in all this is that at this very point and juncture, the author of the history leaves the battle pending, apologizing because he found nothing else written about the feats of Don Quixote other than what he has already recounted” (64).¹⁸ For the purpose of further dissociating himself from “the author”, Cervantes has interrupted his own story; an engaged reader who had been enjoying the story might feel annoyed at this moment, but readers who have caught onto Cervantes’ games might also simply think the interruptions humorous. The narrator then continues:

It is certainly true that the second author of this work did not want to believe that so curious a history would be subjected to the laws of oblivion, or that the great minds of La Mancha possessed so little interest that they did not have in their archives or writing tables a few pages that dealt with this famous knight; and so, with this thought in mind, he did not despair of finding the conclusion to this gentle

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¹⁸ “Pero está el daño de todo esto que en este punto y término deja pendiente el autor desta historia esta batalla, disculpándose que no halló más escrito destas hazañas de don Quijote, de las que deja referidas” (83).
history, which, with heaven’s help, he discovered in the manner that will be revealed in the part two. (64-65)\textsuperscript{19}

In this moment the narrator introduces yet another player— “the second author”— and by using the third person, seems to continue to indicate that he, the narrator, is neither the first nor the second author. He claims that the conclusion to this adventure is missing, but “did not despair”— this echoes Don Quixote’s relationship with fiction. Upon finishing a book, Quixote would find the promise of untold adventure exciting, and decide upon his own ending to the story. Without the resolution of this particular adventure, readers are forced to do the same, at least for the time being. Cervantes could just be playing games with the audience for fun, but this interruption also serves to make a statement about the nature of fiction and authorship; that is, readers have great freedom and responsibility in interpreting stories.

Cervantes’ relationship with the concept of authorship—and thus himself as an author—is interesting; apart from playfully giving up any authority over his own novel, he introduces himself as a character briefly in Chapter Six. Realizing that Don Quixote has gone mad from reading literature, the barber and the priest are going through his personal library and deciding which books to burn and which books to save. After the men toss many books into the pile to burn, they come across La Galatea by none other than Miguel de Cervantes. In deciding whether or not to toss it into the fire, one of them says:

This Cervantes has been a good friend of mine for many years, and I know that he is better versed in misfortunes than in verses. His book has a certain creativity; it

\textsuperscript{19} “Bien es verdad que el segundo autor de esta obra no quiso creer que tan curiosa historia estuviese entregada a las leyes del olvido, ni que hubiesen sido tan poco curiosos los ingenios de la Mancha, que no tuviesen en sus archivos o en sus escritorios algunos papeles que de este famoso caballero tratasen; y así, con esta imaginación, no se desesperó de hallar el fin de esta apacible historia, el cual, siéndole el cielo favorable, le halló del modo que se contará en la segunda parte” (83).
proposes something and concludes nothing. We have to wait for the second part he has promised; perhaps with that addition it will achieve the mercy denied to it now; in the meantime, keep it locked away in your house, my friend. (52)  

Here, Cervantes is doing a few interesting things. First, by placing himself in the same world as his characters, he is building on the idea that Don Quixote is a historical figure and that the story really took place, while simultaneously fictionalizing himself. He is offering a kind of critical review of his own work—his first book, La Galatea. His book “proposes something and concludes nothing”—much like Don Quixote has begun to do. But more than a playful commentary on his own work specifically, he is posing the idea that literature is dangerous to naïve readers; although it is promising, this book of Cervantes’ needs to be “[kept] locked away” where Don Quixote can’t get to it.

Throughout even just the first nine chapters of his novel, Cervantes plays with authorship and the line between reality and fiction in a myriad of ways; he raises many questions about fiction in general. Who is in charge—the author or the reader? Whose interpretation is the “correct” one? Where precisely is the line between fiction and reality? These questions seem to have taken hold and are still relevant today. Don Quixote is one of the seminal texts in the genre of metafiction, and both Borges and later Auster would continue to explore many of the questions Cervantes raises therein.

20 “Muchos años ha que es grande amigo mío ese Cervantes, y sé que es más versado en desdichas que en versos. Su libro tiene algo de buena invención: propone algo, y no concluye nada; es menester esperar la segunda parte que promete: quizá con la enmienda alcanzará del todo la misericordia que ahora se le niega; y entre tanto que esto se ve, tenedle recluso en vuestra posada, señor compadre” (68).
BORDES AND METAFICTION

“PIERRE MENARD, AUTOR DEL QUIJOTE”

Over three hundred years after Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote*, Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges would play with many of the same questions about authorship in many of his metafictional short stories. One such story in the collection *Ficciones*, “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote”, centers around a recently deceased “novelista” — a novelist — named Pierre Menard. The story takes the form of a literature review, with the narrator first providing a list of Menard’s works. To this point, the story has seemed somewhat archival — just a list to document the written works of some author named Menard. This list of this novelist’s works is a bit absurd; it includes nothing that could be called a novel, but does include things like, “a technical article on the possibility of improving the game of chess, eliminating one of the rook’s pawns. Menard proposes, recommends, discusses and finally rejects this innovation” (37).²¹ ²²

Are these works noteworthy enough to be enumerated in this way? In his famous essay, “What is an Author?” Michel Foucault poses this problem:

> Even when an individual has been accepted as an author, we must still ask whether everything that he wrote, said, or left behind is part of his work. The problem is both theoretical and technical … a laundry list: is it a work, or not? Why not? And so on, ad infinitum. How can one define a work amid the millions of traces left by someone after his death? (379)

²¹All future references to this story in English will be to this translation by James E. Irby, parenthetically, by page number.

²²“un artículo técnico sobre la posibilidad de enriquecer el ajedrez eliminando uno de los peones de torre. Menard propone, recomienda, discute y acaba por rechazar esa innovación” (43).

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Pierre Menard’s list of “works” don’t seem very noteworthy—the majority of his writings are either technical—like his piece on chess—or secondary in nature, somehow dealing with or responding to other people’s writing; certainly none of them count as novels.

Then, after providing such a list of essays, poems, prefaces and manuscripts, the narrator turns to the most notable of Menard’s works: “This work, perhaps the most significant of our time, consists of the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of the first part of Don Quixote and a fragment of chapter twenty-two” (38-39). Menard’s most significant work, it turns out, is someone else’s—that is, Cervantes’. Not only that, this work isn’t even Don Quixote in its entirety but a mere two and a half chapters. When the narrator asserts that this is “the most significant [work] of our time” the story begins to confirm itself as a game; this “significant” work is nothing but a copy of Cervantes’ Don Quixote—though the narrator will argue that it is not a copy.

Menard is an avid reader of Cervantes’ Quixote and isn’t satisfied only with reading—he wants to actually write the Quixote. He embarks on a mission:

He did not want to compose another Quixote—which is easy—but the Quixote itself. Needless to say, he never contemplated a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy it. His admirable intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes. (39)²⁴

²³ “Esa obra, tal vez la más significativa de nuestro tiempo, consta de los capítulos noveno y trigésimo octavo de la primera parte del don Quijote y de un fragmento del capítulo veintidós” (45-46).

²⁴ “No quería componer otro Quijote—lo cual es fácil—sino el Quijote. Inútil agregar que no encaró nunca una transcripción mecánica del original; no se proponía copiarlo. Su admirable ambición era producir unas páginas que coincidieran—palabra por palabra y línea por línea—con las de Miguel de Cervantes” (47).
This project, and the narrator’s description of it, raises many questions about the nature of authorship. Firstly, how can “the Quixote itself”—being distinguished from “another Quixote”—refer to anything besides the original book by Cervantes? Menard’s opinion, as conveyed by the narrator, seems to be that these two are wildly different things. To write “another” Quixote is to replicate the original. To write the Quixote itself is to be original—to write something that is one-of-a-kind—and so, as the narrator points out, he obviously cannot copy it out word for word.

What follows is a puzzling and ironic statement; how can Menard’s goal be to write something identical to “the Quixote itself” without copying it? Even if Menard did not look at the Quixote as he was writing, he was first and foremost a devout reader of the book; anything he wrote down would be drawn from his memory and experience as a reader—the words he wrote would be based on his understanding of the words Cervantes wrote—and therefore, in essence, a copy.

Menard sets out to achieve this impossible task with a strategy even more impossible to enact—a strategy the narrator, however, deems easy: “The first method he conceived was relatively simple. Know Spanish well, recover the Catholic faith, fight against the Moors or the Turk, forget the history of Europe between the years 1602 and 1918, be Miguel de Cervantes” (40). This strategy carries the implicit belief that Cervantes’ life and historical context—his biographical information—were the most essential factors in the creation of his novel. From this stance, to write “the Quixote itself” Menard need only live his life as Cervantes, and the Quixote would follow. This would assume that Menard would be able to understand Cervantes’ intentions and inspirations in the Quixote, which are, of course, unknowable.

25 “El método inicial que imaginó era relativamente sencillo. Conocer bien el español, recuperar la fe católica, guerrear contra los moros o contra el turco, olvidar la historia de Europa entre los años de 1602 y de 1918, ser Miguel de Cervantes” (47).
In this particularly outlandish moment, the narrator jumps into conversation with the reader directly after relating that Mena
d deems this approach too easy: “Rather as impossible! my reader will say. Granted, but the undertaking was impossible from the very beginning and of all the impossible ways of carrying it out, this was the least interesting” (40). This moment is striking because it calls attention to the fact that not only is the story about an author (Menard) of a bizarre project and its reception by a friend and reader (the narrator)—it’s also about our response as readers to the project and its defense, given by the narrator. That is, the narrator also carries the status of “author.” In the original Spanish, “el lector”—the reader—would say that the project was impossible. Is the narrator referring to the reader of Menard’s work or the reader of this critical review? The English translation above takes the second interpretation, translating “el lector” to “my reader”; this calls attention to the narrator’s own awareness of himself as an author with a relationship to his reader, and engages the reader—plays with the reader—to enter into a dialogue.

The most intriguing and absurd part of this story, however, comes when the narrator actually analyzes Menard’s writing. He describes comparing Menard’s Quixote to Cervantes’ as “una revelación” (52)—and juxtaposes an excerpt from chapter nine of each author’s Quixote. Unsurprisingly, the two excerpts are identical. The narrator offers first Cervantes’ writing (a piece of the Quixote itself…) and renders it “a mere rhetorical praise of history” (43). Then, as a “contrast”, he offers Menard’s verbatim reconstruction, and follows up with this analysis: “The contrast in style is also vivid. The archaic style of Menard—quite foreign, after all—suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his forerunner, who handles with ease the current Spanish of

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26 “¡Más bien por imposible! dirá el lector. De acuerdo, pero la empresa era de antemano imposible y de todos los medios imposibles para llevarla a término, éste era el menos interesante” (48).

27 “un mero elogio retórico de la historia” (53).
his time” (43). Both the narrator and Menard—the narrator through his analysis, and Menard through his strategy for writing the *Quixote*—seem certain that the historical context of a book and the biographical context of its author matter in determining the meaning and quality of a work. This moment is humorous in its absurdity, but taken out of context some of the narrator’s points are actually valid. The narrator points out that Spanish is not Menard’s first language, not to mention the Spanish of a couple hundred years prior. A reader of Menard’s *Quixote* would certainly note his “archaic” style, provided they were given the contextual and biographical information about Menard himself. However, through reading only the excerpts given and knowing none of this contextual information, there would be no way to know that Menard did not speak Spanish as fluently as Cervantes, and there would be no room to compare and contrast, because the juxtaposed excerpts are completely identical. Reading the excerpts alone, one cannot differentiate the style or affectation. Borges seems to be simultaneously recognizing the validity in considering the context of a piece of writing, and pointing out the absurdity of using such context to draw conclusions about it.

“Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote” raises many questions about authorship and readership: firstly, what constitutes a “work”—even more specifically, a “visible work”? What makes a work original or authentic? How can a reader ever completely understand an author’s intentions? Is biographical information vital to the interpretation of a work? Can someone with that information about an author put it aside temporarily and still understand the work in the

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28 “También es vivido el contraste de los estilos. El estilo arcaizante de Menard—extranjero al fin—adolece de alguna afectación. No así el del precursor, que maneja con desenfado el español corriente de su época” (53).
same way? How much should readers take into consideration the context of the time, the wider discourse, the preceding literature, the author’s biographical information when reading a book?²⁹

In his essay, Foucault questions the “relationship between text and author” (377) and claims:

It is a very familiar thesis that the task of criticism is not to bring out the work’s relationships with the author, nor to reconstruct through the text a thought or experience, but rather to analyze the work through its structure, its architecture, its intrinsic form, and the play of its internal relationships. At this point, however, a problem arises: What is a work? … Is it not what an author has written? (379)

Menard’s quest to become the author of the *Quixote* seems to depend entirely on his relationship to the story—the chapters that he (re)writes are identical in structure, in architecture, in intrinsic form to that of Cervantes, and thus the only thing that makes the writing different or makes it *his* is the fact that *he* wrote it—that some biographical person other than Cervantes wrote it. Is Menard’s rendition of the *Quixote* a work? Does the fact that he—in a different historical context and with a different knowledge of Spanish and a completely different personal life—wrote it (copied it?) down make it a work separate from Cervantes’? Is Menard even an author?

Even more specifically, is he, as Menard describes, a *novelist*?

Foucault claims that works are defined by their relationship to an author—or rather, to an *author function*—but in determining what defines an author, there seems to be a bit of circular reasoning at play:

²⁹ This can even become an ethical question; if a reader learns that an author was a Nazi, should they ignore potential Nazi ideology? Do the author’s historical context and personal beliefs fundamentally change their work? Is it irresponsible to ignore them when interpreting, for example, themes of purity?
What is an author’s name? How does it function? … It has other than indicative functions: more than an indication, a gesture, a finger pointed at someone, it is the equivalent of a description. When one says ‘Aristotle,’ one employs a word that is the equivalent of one, or a series, of definite descriptions, such as ‘the author of the Analytics,’ ‘the founder of ontology,’ and so forth. (380)

Authors, then—or at least their names—function as a kind of categorization of literary works; Aristotle calls to mind a specific list of works, and so too does Shakespeare, for example.30

Menard, in this story, does have a list of “visible works” but none of them seem particularly noteworthy, or even related to one another. Even in this fictional world, it seems unlikely that the name “Menard” would call to mind “author of ‘a technical article on the possibility of improving the game of chess, eliminating one of the rook’s pawns’” nor any of his other “works.”31 Foucault continues:

...the fact that several texts have been placed under the same name indicates that there has been established among them a relationship of homogeneity … authentication of some texts by the use of others … The author’s name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse … it is a speech that must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, must receive certain status. (381-382)

Menard’s works seem to have nothing to do with each other, but are, rather, isolated and somewhat random fragments of writing that were cobbled together into a list. Not one of them stands out as having significant literary merit, and Menard himself does not seem to have enough

30 Author of *Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, MacBeth, A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, “Sonnet 18”, etc.

31 The narrator claims that he is trying to defend Menard’s reputation, however, which indicates that Menard is at least well-known enough to have some kind of reputation.
influence for one to “authenticate” any of his texts by simply attributing it to him. In fact, the narrator—who himself claims to have “pobre autoridad” (42) or poor authority—concedes on the first page that the following pages could be seen as insufficient, and relies on an appeal to the authority of others (the Baroness de Bacourt, the Countess de Bagnoregio) to give the essay merit.

Pierre Menard is allegedly the author of the Quixote but in Foucault’s framework, he doesn’t exactly seem to be an author at all. In this story, Borges is clearly underscoring the ridiculous nature of interpreting a text based on its author’s biographical context, but he also seems to be prodding at the question of what makes an author legitimate (i.e. have authority) in the first place.

“BORGES Y YO”

One of Borges’ shorter pieces, “Borges y yo” (Borges and I)—which originally appeared in the collection El hacedor, published fourteen years earlier than Ficciones, and thus fourteen years earlier than “Pierre Menard”—explores the relationship between an author and the “author function” (that Foucault outlined) in a provocative way. “Borges y yo” seems more intimate than many of Borges’ other works, including those that deal directly with the Quixote; in this particular story, Borges seems to be writing as himself as opposed to an unnamed narrator. Even this assertion is dangerous; as Foucault claims in “What is an Author?”:

The text always contains a certain number of signs referring to the author. These signs, well known to grammarians, are personal pronouns … Everyone knows that, in a novel offered as a narrator’s account, neither the first-person pronoun nor the present indicative refers exactly to the writer or to the moment in which he writes
but, rather, to an alter ego whose distance from the author varies, often changing in
the course of the work. It would be just as wrong to equate the author with the real
writer as to equate him with the fictitious speaker; the author function is carried out
and operates in the scission itself, in this division and this distance. (385)

“Borges y yo”, however, calls attention to this scission, and attempts to transcend or close it.
Foucault claims it is a mistake to conflate the 
author with either the real writer or the fictitious speaker, but never mentions the conflation of the real writer and the fictitious speaker, which is what the voice in “Borges y yo” seems to be. The subject of the piece is explicitly Borges, the author—but then the yo—the I—refers to someone else—it seems to indicate Borges the man, the real writer.

The narrator begins this piece by immediately dissociating himself from the name
Borges: “The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to” (246). He claims not to be the same person as this “other” Borges. The narrator continues to elaborate the characteristics and preferences of “el otro”, but all the while with an almost scathing tone and sense of detachment: “… [the other] shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor” (246). Borges’ fame does not belong to the narrator—in a sense it even corrupts the narrator. Even the narrator’s own personality is somehow made insincere by Borges’ fame—his tastes become nothing more than “attributes of an actor.” This divide between the public and private faces of Borges exemplify the “author function”. Borges

32 “Al otro, a Borges, es a quien le ocurren las cosas” (50).

33 All future references to this story in English will be to this translation by James E. Irby, parenthetically, by page number.

34 “…el otro comparte esas preferencias, pero de un modo vanidoso que las convierte en atributos de un actor” (50).
the man is not the same as the name that appears on his books. And ultimately, his books don’t even belong to him:

It is no effort for me to confess that he has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him, but rather to the language and to tradition. Besides, I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in him. (246)35

Borges himself—the historical man himself—will not survive through his books. Readers generations in the future will not know Borges the man by reading his works. But his name will live on, printed on the cover of his books. Only this aspect of Borges the man’s identity—his name—can survive in his writing. Once written down and disseminated, however, his writing belongs “to the language and to tradition”.

“Borges y yo” is largely about an author’s relationship with himself, and thus in many ways is about an author reading his own works. The narrator also expresses his status as a reader of other people’s writing. Speaking of “the other Borges’” writing, the narrator says, “I recognize myself less in his books than in many others” (246).36 Borges the man identifies with other people’s writing—just like his character Pierre Menard does, and just like Don Quixote before him.

The most provocative line of the story, in true Borgesian fashion, is the last. It reads, “No sé cuál de los dos escribe esta página” (51) — “I do not know which of us has written this page” (247). The narrator, upon writing the last sentence of the piece, claims not to know whether what

35 “Nada me cuesta confesar que ha logrado ciertas páginas válidas, pero esas páginas no me pueden salvar, quizá porque lo bueno ya no es de nadie, ni siquiera del otro, sino del lenguaje o la tradición. Por lo demás, yo estoy destinado a perderme, definitivamente, y sólo algún instante de mi podrá sobrevivir en el otro” (50).

36 “me reconozco menos en sus libros que en muchos otros” (50-51).
he has just finished writing was really written by him or by the other Borges. The narrator knows he just wrote something down, but he simultaneously knows that these words will belong to “the other” Borges the moment the words are formed, and even more once they are read by another person—this moment of reading is pivotal.

In his translation above, Irby makes two decisions that change the nuanced implications in this final sentence. First, he translates “cuál de los dos” to “which of us” (emphasis mine), as opposed to the literal translation of which of the two. This literal translation adds another dimension to the piece; throughout, Borges is at odds with himself— with his author function self. He feels himself to be separate from the Borges that world knows. Throughout “Borges y yo” there are two distinct versions of Borges—until this last line. Translated literally, there is another level of separation that Borges draws within himself. By referring to “the two” in the third person like this, he almost seems to have drawn back even further into himself, ceasing even to identify with the consciousness that he has had throughout the writing of the story.

The second decision Irby makes is to translate the simple present tense of “escribe”, conjugated in the third person singular—therefore literally translated as [he/she/it] writes—into “has written”. In Irby’s translation, this use of the present perfect tense places the act of writing ever-so-slightly in the past; one of the two has completed writing, and in retrospect, the narrator does not know whether it was him or the other Borges. However, translated literally, the act of writing is ongoing— “I do not know which of the two writes this page” is considerably more unsettling. One can imagine the narrator in the act of writing, unsure even as he pens his thoughts to whom he can attribute them.

Cervantes claimed not to be the author of Don Quixote, but in a playful way. Borges, too, plays with the idea of authorship in his stories, but pushes it into the unsettling. In “Pierre
Menard, autor del Quijote”, Menard presumes that by getting into Cervantes’ head and beginning to write, the *Quixote* will inevitably follow—it’s as if he reads the novel as a direct and unalterable archive of Cervantes’ life and thoughts. By becoming Cervantes there is no other result possible than writing the *Quixote*; the meaning and inspiration behind the novel comes straight from Cervantes’ biographical life. This story of Borges’ underscores how this strategy—reading a piece and finding meaning, not in the text, but in the life of its author—is ridiculous.37 “Borges y yo”, like *Don Quixote*, raises questions about the relationship between authors and their own texts (Does writing belong to the author, or “to language and tradition”?), but also raises questions about how identity can be formed—or fractured—through writing.

**AUSTER AND METAFICTION**

*City of Glass*

Fast-forward another couple of decades, and in steps Paul Auster to the growing canon of metafiction. Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* is saturated with allusions to other works, including ample usage of Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* and the works of Jorge Luis Borges. His story—the accounts of a mysterious set of circumstances that lead Daniel Quinn, the protagonist, into an exhaustive investigation and philosophical introspection—revolves around books, writing, and reading. Auster said himself in an interview with Joseph Mallia that appears in *The Art of Hunger*: “Quinn’s story in *City of Glass* alludes to *Don Quixote*, and the questions raised

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37 This strategy, according to Barthes, began to be undermined when writers began to see “in its full extent the necessity to substitute language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner” (143). Just as the narrator claims in “Borges y yo”, writing ultimately belongs to language and the tradition—not its author. Writing, once penned, enters into the vast “tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes 146).
in the two books are very similar: what is the line between madness and creativity, what is the
line between the real and the imaginary, is Quinn crazy to do what he does or not?” (Auster 281).

Parodying the genre of detective fiction, \textit{City of Glass} introduces mystery after bizarre
mystery, but as Quinn investigates, almost no questions are answered. In his interview with
Mallia, Auster said, “If a true follower of detective fiction ever tried to read one of \textit{The New
York Trilogy}, I’m sure he would be bitterly disappointed. Mystery novels always give answers;
my work is about asking questions” (310). Quinn, who becomes the detective, works tirelessly
and obsessively to find explanations. After having what seems to be an epiphany to solve the
case, however, the case begins to disappear from right under his nose.

As Quinn tries to make sense of the bizarre job he is tasked with, the reader must make
sense of the strange narration that is \textit{City of Glass}. Just as Cervantes played with the idea of
authorship throughout \textit{Don Quixote} and just as Borges took that play to a philosophical level,
one of the most notable things about Paul Auster’s \textit{City of Glass} is the complicated and
multifaceted idea of authorship—of an author’s relationship to his biographical self, his
relationship with the narrator of his story, and his relationship to his reader.

The bizarre narration in the novel raises questions that should be easy to answer—but
really aren’t. For example: \textit{who is the author}? This is a fact: Paul Auster, the American author
born on February 3, 1947, wrote \textit{City of Glass}. However, a multitude of Paul Austers enter the

\footnote{This, too, seems to borrow from Borges. Borges’ story “La muerte y la brújula” or “Death and the
Compass” departs from the patterns of the mystery genre; it centers around a detective who follows all
the wrong trails, ultimately leading to his downfall. The ending of “Death and the Compass” seems
truncated; the reader, having looked through the eyes of the detective—who is wrong—experiences no
cathartic moment of revelation at the end, nor even experiences the closure of a complete failure. The
death of “Death and the Compass” never actually takes place; the story ends when the gun is fired, but
the bullet never reaches its victim. Perhaps this leaves room for some readers to imagine and author their
own ending, in which the detective somehow survives by dodging the bullet and ultimately beating the
criminal—but may also leave readers feeling dissatisfied. On the brink of completing the puzzle, they
realize that the final piece is missing, and they will never be able to finish the picture.}
scene to complicate everything. The inclusion of a character named Paul Auster, for example, who, like the man whose name appears on the cover, is an American author with a wife named Siri living in New York—but who very clearly is not the writer of the story at hand—in addition to the unnamed narrator who only asserts himself at the very end of the novel—in addition to the possibility of a third Paul Auster (of the Paul Auster detective agency)—all combine to blur the lines between author and narrator, fiction and reality.

**AUTHOR VS. MAN**

In an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory that appears in *The Art of Hunger*, Paul Auster (the living, breathing man) and Gregory have the following exchange:

SG: ...I would have assumed you would have tried to prevent your audience from reading *City of Glass* as a disguised autobiography. Instead you introduce this possibility, and play with it in various ways. Why?

PA: I think it stemmed from a desire to implicate myself in the machinery of the book. I don’t mean my autobiographical self, I mean my author self, that mysterious other who lives inside me and puts my name on the cover of books. What I was hoping to do, in effect, was to take my name off the cover and put it inside the story.

I wanted to open up the process, to break down walls, to expose the plumbing. (308)

This idea of a split between the author self and the autobiographical self echoes the musings throughout “Borges y yo”; Auster speaks of a “mysterious other who lives inside [him]” and Borges also constantly refers to an other—“el otro”. Auster said that his “author self … puts [Auster the man’s] name on the cover of books”, indicating a similar sense of separation—
Borges and Auster the men both seem to feel that Borges and Auster the authors are totally distinct personas.

In *City of Glass*, Auster’s main character, also an author, struggles with many of the same preoccupations. Before even adopting a false identity, Daniel Quinn feels such a disconnect with his author self that he adopts a pseudonym—William Wilson—to clearly distinguish the two:

Because he did not consider himself to be the author of what he wrote, he did not feel responsible for it and therefore was not compelled to defend it in his heart. William Wilson, after all, was an invention, and even though he had been born within Quinn himself, he now led an independent life. Quinn treated him with deference, at times even admiration, but he never went so far as to believe that he and William Wilson were the same man. It was for this reason that he did not emerge from behind the mask of his pseudonym…(4-5)

William Wilson “[leads] an independent life” and Quinn never considers them to be “the same man.” They don’t even share a name—the divide here is absolute. Quinn, like Borges, does not have a sense of ownership over what he writes; his detective novels belong to an other—William Wilson. He feels that he is not “the author of what he wrote, [and so] he did not feel responsible for it”; if authorship brings authority, then with authority comes great responsibility. By casting off this sense of ownership, Quinn shirks any responsibility he has to the text.

In *City of Glass*, the fictitious speaker never introduces himself as Auster the real writer like the narrator does in “Borges y yo”. As in *Don Quixote*, Paul Auster introduces himself as a character into his novel. However, the first time his name appears within the novel, it doesn’t even refer to a fictionalized version of his autobiographical self. When Peter Stillman calls Daniel Quinn in the middle of the night asking to speak with Paul Auster, he doesn’t ask for the
author, but rather “Paul Auster. Of the Auster Detective Agency” (8). As far as the reader can surmise throughout the rest of the novel, there is no such person as Detective Paul Auster. Quinn, however, assumes this potentially-non-existent identity. When Stillman calls him a second time asking for Detective Paul Auster, Quinn replies, “Speaking … This is Auster speaking” (12). Eventually, the reader meets the “real” Paul Auster—that is, the character in the novel given this name. Quinn seeks the detective he is impersonating and, instead, discovers yet another author:

“I’m afraid you’ve got the wrong Paul Auster.”

“You’re the only one in the book.”

“That might be,” said Auster. “But I’m not a detective.”

“Who are you then? What do you do?”

“I’m a writer.” (113)

This exchange is intriguing, and although they are talking about the phonebook, the Paul Auster in this scene is so far from being the only one in the book. There’s the Auster on the cover of the book (which splits into both Auster the man and Auster the author), there’s the possible Detective Auster whose number may just be unlisted, the writer character Quinn speaks to named Auster, and the Auster that Quinn becomes throughout his investigations. By this count, there are at least five Austers in the book.

The writer character Paul Auster, the one whose life bears so many resemblances to Paul Auster the man, is clearly not the author of City of Glass; this seems the most literal way that Auster indicates that the author is somehow separate from the man. Borges ends his parable with the lament, “I do not know which of us has written this page” (247). Auster, too, complicates the question of who wrote City of Glass throughout the entire novel, playing with the role of the narrator in striking ways.
The vast majority of City of Glass is narrated in a fairly conventional way. The story revolves around Daniel Quinn throughout the novel, and his story is told by what for the most part seems to be a detached authorial persona with no stake or role in the story—not at all a distinct character, but, as Peter Barry summarizes in his Beginning Theory chapter on narratology, “a mere ‘telling medium’ which strives for neutrality and transparency.” At several points throughout City of Glass, however, the usual third-person narration gives way for brief usages of the first person. When Quinn is first being introduced, for example, the narrator says (echoing the narrator in Don Quixote):

As for Quinn, there is little that need detain us. Who he was, where he came from, and what he did are of no great importance. We know, for example, that he was thirty-five years old. We know that he had once been married, had once been a father, and that both his wife and son were now dead. We also know that he wrote books. To be precise, we know that he wrote mystery novels. These works were written under the name of William Wilson, and he produced them at a rate of about one a year … (3)

This “we” doesn’t necessarily stand out as coming from a particular character—it seems a general “we” that includes the reader with some omniscient being who is telling the story. This limited-omniscient narration continues, and the narrator is able to look into Quinn’s head to explain his thoughts and opinions. “His last thought before he went to sleep was that he probably had two more days…” says the narrator at one point, peeking into Quinn’s head (87). None of this narration is unconventional. As the novel progresses, however, and Quinn becomes more and more obsessed with the case, the narrator loses some grip on Quinn’s thoughts; when Quinn
leaves his post in the alleyway, the narrator professes, “We will never know the agonies he suffered at having to leave his spot” (142). Considering that the narrator has been completely able to discern Quinn’s thoughts to this point, this moment is strange—it’s as if Quinn is losing his mind, and the narrator simultaneously loses access.

It isn’t until the last two pages of the novel, however, that the narrator steps in as a character (becoming a part of the story, and therefore not necessarily neutral) and we find out we have been reading an embedded narrative (or meta-narrative, or secondary narrative…) all along. As Auster himself said in an interview appearing in The Art of Hunger, the introduction of the narrator as a character and this revelation that the story is actually an embedded narrative “colors the book in retrospect somehow, turning the whole story into a kind of oblique, first-person narrative” (317). All along, the narrator seemed to be an omniscient authorial persona, but they were really (allegedly) recounting the events that Quinn described in his red notebook: “I have followed the red notebook as closely as I could, and any inaccuracies in the story should be blamed on me. There were moments when the text was difficult to decipher, but I have done my best with it and have refrained from any interpretations” (158). This echoes the sentiments of the narrator and the structure of Don Quixote; in both cases, the narrators are engaging in a retelling, conveying someone else’s story, and claiming to stay as close to the truth as possible. These narrators, however, have obviously been offering interpretations and elaborations throughout. In City of Glass, the narrator is constantly sharing with us things Quinn could not have possibly written in the red notebook (such as flash-forwards). The narrator continues, “The red notebook, of course, is only half the story, as any sensitive reader will understand” (158). But if the narrator has been “refraining from interpretation”, then where does the other “half the story” come from?
It’s very ambiguous whether the narrator identifies as the author of the story. Before the narrator enters and becomes a character, the disembodied authorial persona references “the author” in the third person on multiple occasions. In one such instance, the narrator says:

A long time passed. Exactly how long it is impossible to say. Weeks certainly, but perhaps even months. The account of this period is less full than the author would have liked. But information is scarce, and he has preferred to pass over in silence what could not be definitely confirmed. Since this story is based entirely on facts, the author feels it is his duty not to overstep the bounds of the verifiable, to resist at all costs the perils of invention. Even the red notebook, which until now has provided a detailed account of Quinn’s experiences, is suspect. (135)

Who is the author that the narrator mentions? On one hand, by referencing “the author” explicitly as a separate person, it seems like the narrator is admitting to being a character in someone else’s book. Are they referring to Paul Auster of the cover? On the other hand, this reads almost like the narrator being cheekily self-referential, using the third person in order to avoid or reject responsibility or authority toward the text. At the close of the novel, when the narrator steps in and uses the first person, they make another claim that “I have done my best with it and have refrained from any interpretation” (158). The narrator seems to feel the same sense of “duty not to overstep the bounds of the verifiable” that we learn “the author” has. In another similar moment, the narrator explains:

It was some time in mid-August when Quinn discovered that he no longer could hold out. The author has confirmed this date through diligent research. It is possible, however, that this moment occurred as early as late July, or as late as early September, since all investigations of this sort must make allowances for a certain
margin of error. But, to the best of his knowledge, having considered the evidence carefully and sifted through all apparent contradictions, the author places the following events in August, somewhere between the twelfth and twenty-fifth of the month. (141)

Again referring to the author in the third person, the narrator occupies a strange space both within the novel and outside of it. In this quote and the prior, the narrator puts a large emphasis on the factuality of the events being described—and yet hedges back and forth on the certainty of various claims. Immediately after saying that the date of Quinn’s discovery was confirmed, the narrator backtracks and says that it’s possible the author was mistaken.

One of the final puzzling moments in the book happens after the narrator has become a character. Upon discovering the red notebook and realizing that Quinn has disappeared, the narrator professes that “As for Auster, I am convinced that he behaved badly throughout” (158). Of course, he could be referring to Auster the character in the book, who “had treated Quinn with such indifference” (157) throughout the case, but there’s also the interpretation that he is referring to the Auster who appears on the cover of the book, the one who has been cooking up all these games. Indeed, Auster the author wrote a puzzling book that raises more questions than it answers, and none of the characters really have any kind of happy ending. From the perspective of both the characters in the novel and the average reader, City of Glass has the potential to be disappointing. Of course, one could simply dismiss this puzzle that Auster presents and say that it doesn’t matter how the narrator and the author are or are not related. In The Art of Hunger, however, Auster himself gives a perfect example of why this relationship is so interesting:
There’s a strange kind of trickery involved in the writing and reading of novels, after all. You see Leo Tolstoy’s name on the cover of War and Peace, but once you open the book, Leo Tolstoy disappears. It’s as though no one has really written the words you’re reading. I find this “no one” terribly fascinating—for there’s finally a profound truth to it. On the one hand, it’s an illusion: on the other hand, it has everything to do with how stories are written. For the author of a novel can never be sure where any of it comes from. The self that exists in the world—the self whose name appears on the covers of books—is finally not the same self who writes the books … Paul Auster appears as a character in City of Glass, but in the end the reader learns that he is not the author. It’s someone else, an anonymous narrator who comes in on the last page and walks off with Quinn’s red notebook. So the Auster on the cover and the Auster in the story are not the same person. They’re the same and yet not the same. Just as the author of War and Peace is both Tolstoy and not Tolstoy. (308-309)

Auster the man, like Borges and like Daniel Quinn, feels a divide between his autobiographical self and his author self. Curiously, throughout his above comment, Auster dissociates from himself to the same level that Borges seems to in “Borges y yo”. He does not say “We’re the same and yet not the same” but rather, they are. Referring to both his autobiographical self and his author self in the third person, Auster seems to create a third category for himself. Where does this third Auster fit in to the picture?

*City of Glass* plays with so many of the possibilities of narration. It is very successful in engaging the reader with questions about the relationship between authors and narrators that are
relevant—but less pressing—in just about every novel. *City of Glass*’ narrator keeps us on our toes, and keeps us thinking about some of the assumptions we make when reading literature. The narrator allegedly “refrains from interpretation” but gives us only “half the story”; we as readers find ourselves in a position like Don Quixote upon finishing one of his tales of chivalry—in charge of filling in the blanks.

**AUTHOR VS. READER**

In one scene of *City of Glass*, Quinn happens to notice a young woman reading one of his detective novels. Feeling at first flattered and elated, he considers divulging his identity to her, autographing her book, and basking in his fame. But upon watching her casually flipping through the pages, taking little notice of his carefully written passages, he becomes annoyed and has to leave in order to refrain from punching her in the face (64-65). Although he has already expressed that he “did not consider himself to be the author of what he wrote, he did not feel responsible for it and therefore was not compelled to defend it in his heart” (5), he is irked by the way that the girl was interacting with his story, for it did not mirror the way he interacted with his own story, and did not seem to reflect the effort he had put into it.

Outside of the novel, Auster has a similar relationship with the readers of *City of Glass*. Auster has described in his interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory how many people consider him a writer of detective novels, and categorize *City of Glass* and the rest of the *New York Trilogy* as part of that genre. Auster, who has “found it rather galling at times” ultimately states that “In the long run, it probably doesn’t matter. People can say whatever they want; they’re entitled to misread books in any way they choose” (310).39 By claiming that people

39 Here is another moment that echoes the prologue of *Don Quixote*. 
can “misread” books however they wish, there is the implication that there is a “correct” way to read a novel—presumably to read it as the author would. This is, of course, impossible, as every reader comes to a book with their own biographical lives, memories, favorite literature, etc., that determine how the novel makes sense to them. Besides, just as Borges writes in “Borges y yo”, “... Those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him, but rather to the language and to tradition” (246). Authors cannot be too attached to what they write, because ultimately they have no ownership over their words, nor any control over how those words will be interpreted.

Roland Barthes, in his famous essay “The Death of the Author”, speaks against the idea that authors ultimately “own” their work or have the final say on how to read it. Barthes explains the “epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology” when he says that, “[t]he explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author ‘confiding’ in us.” In City of Glass, although the narrator is revealed at the end of the novel to be a person, not just a disembodied consciousness telling the story, the reader receives almost no biographical information of any kind. The first moment in which the narrator is revealed to be a character offers only a couple vague bits of biographical context:

I returned home from my trip to Africa in February, just hours before a snowstorm began to fall on New York. I called my friend Auster that evening, and he urged me to come over to see him as soon as I could. There was something so insistent in his voice that I dared not refuse, even though I was exhausted. (157)

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40 “... Esas páginas no me pueden salvar, quizá porque lo bueno ya no es de nadie, ni siquiera del otro, sino del lenguaje o la tradición” (50).
We learn that this character traveled to Africa, that their home is New York, that they are friends with Auster (and therefore not an Auster), and nothing more. This is almost maddening—Auster is intentionally playing with the reader’s strong desire to know who is speaking. In “Death of the Author,” Barthes also claims, “Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (147). Texts are readable, but they are undecipherable. Knowing an author’s purpose, inspiration, or thought process is impossible, and therefore knowing how the author intended the text to be read is impossible. Texts aren’t codes with one true and secret meaning; they are springboards for interpretation and construction of meaning. “In the multiplicity of writing,” Barthes continues, “everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered” (147).

In a separate interview (with Joseph Mallia), Auster expressed an opinion contrasting with a prior one the role of the reader in constructing meaning out of a novel; he said that “The one thing I try to do in all my books is to leave enough room in the prose for the reader to inhabit it. Because I finally believe it’s the reader who writes the book and not the writer” (282). Barthes, too, has worked toward this conclusion throughout his essay: he argues that the one place where all the complexities of writing are focused is the reader, who thus has all the power of interpretation available to them. However, Barthes argues, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (148).

City of Glass seems to have many authors. Auster of the front cover is obviously one of them, but Auster the character is an author within the story, as is Quinn. The narrator who walks off with Quinn’s red notebook at the end of the novel could be said to be an author. And finally, the reader can be an author, because ultimately it is the reader that makes sense of the words on a
page, in whose mind those words become images and characters. In any book, there is a similar multiplicity of “authors”, but unlike many conventional narratives, *City of Glass* makes this impossible to overlook. Readers cannot passively rely on the narrator to tell the story; they must instead take an active role in making sense of the twists and turns of this bizarre novel.

**CONCLUSION**

In one fascinating scene of *City of Glass*, Daniel Quinn and the character Paul Auster are having a conversation about *Don Quixote*. Both Quinn and Auster are enthusiastic readers of the novel, and Auster describes an essay he is working on dealing with the authorship of the book. He explains that the basis of his essay is “tongue-in-cheek” and based on “an imaginative reading, I guess you could say” (116). Although Auster the character plays with the idea that Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote* as “an attack on the dangers of the make-believe”, he likes to suspect that “In some sense, Don Quixote was just a stand-in for himself, [that is, Cervantes,]” and Quinn agrees: “What better portrait of a writer than to show a man who has been bewitched by books?” (117).

Later, as his case drives Daniel Quinn further and further into madness, his thoughts return to this conversation, and “he wondered why he had the same initials as Don Quixote” (155). Quinn—a writer—becomes bewitched by the story of his case, a story that ends up being almost entirely “an imaginative reading” on Quinn’s part. Just as Don Quixote was a flawed reader of books of chivalry, Daniel Quinn is a flawed reader of the reality around him; they are both bewitched by the infinite possibilities of narratives and stories.

The character Auster comes to a conclusion about what he finds to be the most fascinating part of *Don Quixote*:
In my opinion, Don Quixote was conducting an experiment. He wanted to test the
gullibility of his fellow men. Would it be possible, he wondered, to stand up before
the world and with the utmost conviction spew out lies and nonsense? To say that
windmills were knights, that a barber’s basin was a helmet, that puppets were real
people? Would it be possible to persuade others to agree with what he said, even
though they did not believe him? In other words, to what extent would people
tolerate blasphemies if they gave them amusement? The answer is obvious, isn’t it?
To any extent. For the proof is that we still read the book. It remains highly amusing
to us. And that’s finally all anyone wants out of a book—to be amused. (119-120)\textsuperscript{41}

Regardless of whether Don Quixote himself was conducting an experiment into the relationship
between nonsense and truth (between fiction and reality), Cervantes, Borges, and Auster are
conducting such experiments. But it isn’t all just to amuse—it is something more.

Cervantes, Borges, and Auster all break the rules of storytelling in some way. As authors,
they don’t do what’s expected of them; instead they play with narration, with authorship,
inserting themselves as characters in their own works. It’s puzzling, and at times perhaps even
frustrating, but it’s also fun and almost \textit{liberating} to read. In seeking any kind of “truth” or
“meaning”, in seeking to \textit{explain} the texts, readers will find that texts have a multiplicity of
truths and meanings.

Perhaps authors write this kind of metafiction because they long to reject the
responsibility or authority typically given to authors, and instead choose to give it to the reader.
Readers—and authors—are flawed, and will never arrive at the single “true” interpretation of a

\textsuperscript{41} Although Auster writes that Don Quixote says that “windmills were knights”, this is not technically
correct. Don Quixote says they are monsters; \textit{he} is the knight that will vanquish them.
text—and why should they? It’s their right to make interpretations, and it’s inevitable that every reader will take something slightly different from an identical text.

City of Glass opens with the following:

It was a wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of night, and the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not. Much later, when he was able to think about the things that happened to him, he would conclude that nothing was real except chance. But that was much later. In the beginning, there was simply the event and its consequences. Whether it might have turned out differently, or whether it was all predetermined with the first word that came from the stranger’s mouth, is not the question. The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell. (3)

Neither the story itself nor its author can dictate whether or not it means something. In reality, the story will mean an infinite number of somethings to an infinite number of readers—in reality, each reader is simultaneously the ultimate authority on the meaning of a story.

In his interview with Joseph Mallia, Auster described his suspicion that readers of detective fiction would be “bitterly disappointed” with City of Glass; he says his novel isn’t about giving answers—“my work is about asking questions” (310). That isn’t to say City of Glass doesn’t draw heavily from the genre of detective fiction, but ultimately, a tidy resolution is not offered. The reader, rather, experiences discomfort—then empowerment. Auster continues in that same interview:

In the end, though, I would say that the greatest influence on my work has been fairy tales, the oral tradition of storytelling. … These are bare bones narratives, narratives largely devoid of details … it’s the reader—or the listener— who
actually tells the story to himself … the mind won’t allow these things to remain blank; it fills in the details itself, it creates images based on its own memories and experiences—which is why these stories resonate so deeply inside us. The listener becomes an active participant in the story. (311)

Stories mean nothing without a reader to experience them. Just as Barthes said, “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text … to close the writing” (147). In contrast, to give a text a reader—to be a reader—is to open the writing, to allow it to breathe, to evolve. Therefore, regardless of the author’s intentions, regardless of the author’s autobiographical information, regardless of the hand that pens the words on the page—it is the reader who determines what those words mean—and why they matter.
Works Cited


