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Citing History: a genealogy of uncertainty from Cicero through Cervantes to Menard

In Jorge Luis Borges' "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" a fragmented quotation from an invisible text is torn from its context (Walter Benjamin) by the narrator who then subjects it to a distinctly modern, and arguably post-modern interpretative gloss, itself a key to understanding Borges' genre-defying text. Ironically (Harold Bloom), the narrator, Menard's ersatz eulogist, re-appropriates the quote from Cervantes' Don Quixote where it is likewise fragmented and torn from its context by that work's narrator, who then subjects it to a distinctly modern, and arguably post-modern interpretive gloss that is itself a key to understanding Cervantes' then genre-defying text. Ironically (E. C. Riley), without attribution and used in connection with the dubious veracity of Don Quixote's ersatz eulogist, the work's narrator has appropriated the quote from book II of Cicero's *De Oratore*, a classical text in which the relationship between history, literature and truth are in question. This paper will present a kind of genealogy of that quotation from Cicero through Cervantes and then to Borges, examining its context in each instance and the subsequent glosses added to it thereby. Ultimately the paper shall argue that each of the added semiotic strata reflects the identification and development of questions of uncertainty fundamental to the enterprise of literature from the perspectives of writer, reader and literary critic alike. For it is an enterprise that, by virtue of its unique relationship to time, subjects history to an ever changing interpretive gloss, blurring the lines between truth and fiction, confounding the roles of reader, writer and critic in the process and, ironically, setting in motion "the passage from one to two, from unity to plurality, and thus on to infinity." (Borges, *A Personal Anthology*, pp. 179-80)