



AV

# Komparatistik

Jahrbuch  
der Deutschen Gesellschaft  
für Allgemeine und Vergleichende  
Literaturwissenschaft

# 2017

Aus dem Inhalt: Joachim Harst, Christian Moser, Linda Simonis: Languages of Theory. Introduction • Maria Boletsi: Towards a Visual Middle Voice. Crisis, Dispossession, and Spectrality in Spain's Hologram Protest • Peter Brandes: Poetics of the Bed. Narrated Everydayness as Language of Theory • Annette Simonis: Stephen Greenblatt and the Making of a New Philology of Culture • Dagmar Reichardt: Creating Notions of Transculturality. The Work of Fernando Ortiz and his Impact on Europe • Michael Eggers: Topics of Theory and the Rhetoric of Bruno Latour • Nicolas Pethes: Philological Paperwork. The Question of Theory within a Praxeological Perspective on Literary Scholarship • Achim Geisenhanslüke: Philological Understanding in the Era After Theory • Joachim Harst: Borges: Philology as Poetry • Regine Strätling: The ›Love of words‹ and the Anti-Philological Stance in Roland Barthes' »S/Z« • Markus Winkler: Genealogy and Philology • Christian Moser: Language and Liability in Eighteenth-Century Theories of the Origin of Culture and Society (Goguet, Smith, Rousseau) • Linda Simonis: The Language of Commitment. The Oath and its Implications for Literary Theory • Kathrin Schödel: Political Speech Acts? Jacques Rancière's Theories and a Political Philology of Current Discourses of Migration • Helmut Pillau: »Ein großer weltlicher Staatsmann wider alle Wahrscheinlichkeiten.« Gertrud Kolmar und Jean-Clément Martin über Robespierre • Pauline Preisler: Die abstrakte Illustration. Paul Klees »Hoffmanneske Märchenszene« und E.T.A. Hoffmanns »Der Goldene Topf« • Nachruf, Rezensionen.

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der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Allgemeine  
und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft  
von Joachim Harst, Christian Moser und Linda Simonis

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# Inhaltsverzeichnis

Joachim Harst / Christian Moser / Linda Simonis Vorwort .....	9
NACHRUF	
Sandro Moraldo Komparatist mit Leidenschaft – Nachruf auf Remo Ceserani .....	11
THEMENSCHWERPUNKT: THE LANGUAGES OF THEORY	
Joachim Harst, Christian Moser, Linda Simonis Languages of Theory. Introduction .....	15
Maria Boletsi Towards a Visual Middle Voice. Crisis, Dispossession, and Spectrality in Spain's Hologram Protest .....	19
Peter Brandes Poetics of the Bed. Narrated Everydayness as Language of Theory .....	37
Annette Simonis Stephen Greenblatt and the Making of a New Philology of Culture ....	53
Dagmar Reichardt Creating Notions of Transculturality. The Work of Fernando Ortiz and his Impact on Europe .....	67
Michael Eggers Topics of Theory and the Rhetoric of Bruno Latour .....	83
Nicolas Pethes Philological Paperwork. The Question of Theory within a Praxeological Perspective on Literary Scholarship .....	99
Achim Geisenhanslüke Philological Understanding in the Era After Theory .....	113

Joachim Harst	
Borges: Philology as Poetry .....	123
Regine Strätling	
The ‘Love of words’ and the Anti-Philological Stance in Roland Barthes’ <i>S/Z</i> .....	139
Markus Winkler	
Genealogy and Philology .....	153
Christian Moser	
Language and Liability in Eighteenth-Century Theories of the Origin of Culture and Society (Goguet, Smith, Rousseau) .....	163
Linda Simonis	
The Language of Commitment. The Oath and its Implications for Literary Theory .....	185
Kathrin Schödel	
Political Speech Acts? Jacques Rancière’s Theories and a Political Philology of Current Discourses of Migration .....	201

#### WEITERE BEITRÄGE

Helmut Pillau	
„Ein großer weltlicher Staatsmann wider alle Wahrscheinlichkeiten.“ Gertrud Kolmar und Jean-Clément Martin über Robespierre .....	221
Pauline Preisler	
Die abstrakte Illustration. Paul Klees <i>Hoffmanneske Märchenscene</i> und E. T. A. Hoffmanns <i>Der Goldene Topf</i> .....	245

#### REZENSIONEN

Markus Schleich, Jonas Nesselhauf. <i>Fernsehserien. Geschichte, Theorie, Narration</i> (Kathrin Ackermann-Pojtinger) .....	263
<i>Primitivismus intermedial.</i> (von Björn Bertrams) .....	266
Julia Bohnengel. <i>Das gegessene Herz. Eine europäische Kulturgeschichte vom Mittelalter bis zum 19. Jahrhundert: Herzmäre – Le cœur mangé – Il cuore mangiato – The eaten heart</i> (von Albert Gier) .....	270

<i>Funktionen der Fantastik. Neue Formen des Weltbezugs von Literatur und Film nach 1945</i> (von Eva Gillhuber) .....	276
Solvejg Nitzke. <i>Die Produktion der Katastrophe. Das Tunguska-Ereignis und die Programme der Moderne</i> (von Stephanie Heimgartner) .....	280
Claudia Lillge. <i>Arbeit. Eine Literatur- und Mediengeschichte Großbritanniens</i> (von Julia Hoydis) .....	282
Paul Strohmaier. <i>Diesseits der Sprache. Immanenz als Paradigma in der Lyrik der Moderne (Valéry, Montale, Pessoa)</i> (von Milan Herold) .....	285
<i>Neue Realismen in der Gegenwartsliteratur</i> (von Michael Navratil) .....	288
Steffen Röhrs. <i>Körper als Geschichte(n). Geschichtsreflexionen und Körperdarstellungen in der deutschsprachigen Erzählliteratur (1981-2012)</i> (von Jonas Nesselhauf) .....	294
<i>Theorie erzählen. Raconter la théorie. Narrating Theory. Fiktionalisierte Literaturtheorie im Roman</i> (von Beatrice Nickel) .....	296
<i>Extreme Erfahrungen. Grenzen des Erlebens und der Darstellung</i> (von Solvejg Nitzke) .....	299
<i>Spielräume und Raumspiele in der Literatur</i> (von Eckhard Lobsien) .....	302
Melanie Rohner. <i>Farbbekennnisse. Postkoloniale Perspektiven auf Max Frischs Stiller und Homo faber</i> (von Iulia-Karin Patrut) .....	306
Christian Moser/Regine Strätling (Hg.). <i>Sich selbst aufs Spiel setzen. Spiel als Technik und Medium von Subjektivierung</i> (von Laetitia Rimpau) .....	311
<i>Die Renaissancen des Kitsch</i> (von Franziska Thiel) .....	318
Reinhard M. Möller. <i>Situationen des Fremden. Ästhetik und Reiseliteratur im späten 18. Jahrhundert</i> (von Sandra Vlasta) .....	323
Michael Eggers. <i>Vergleichendes Erkennen. Zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte und Epistemologie des Vergleichs und zur Genealogie der Komparatistik</i> (von Carsten Zelle) .....	327
<i>Nach Szondi. Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft an der Freien Universität Berlin 1965-2015</i> (von Carsten Zelle) .....	333
<i>The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Berlin</i> (von Gianna Zocco) .....	336



BUCHVORSTELLUNG

Sabine Mainberger/Esther Ramharter (Hg.): <i>Linienwissen und Liniendenken</i> .....	343
Beiträgerinnen und Beiträger der Ausgabe 2017 .....	346

Joachim Harst

## Borges: Philology as Poetry

The titles of many of Borges's poems refer to canonical texts of world literature. One poem, for example, deals with the ending of the *Odyssey* and is simply called *A scholion*; others are called *Inferno V, 129* and *Paradise XXXI, 108*, referring both to Dante's *Divine Comedy*.<sup>1</sup> These titles indicate that in his poems, Borges often keeps his distance from traditional poetical matters such as love, or, more generally, immediate emotions. Instead, he writes poems that gloss other texts, some of which actually relate love stories. Thus, Borges's poems stage themselves as philological commentaries rather than as poetry in its own right. In a similar vein and on a more general level, Borges likes to present himself in poems, interviews, and essays as a fervent reader of world literature, playing down his role as an original author: He is a lover of books and a philologist, not a writer of genius. His poem *A reader*, for example, begins: "Let others boast of pages I have written,/ I take pride in those I have read."<sup>2</sup> As a result, he states that although he is not a philologist who pores over linguistic details, he professed all his life the "passion of language." Borges employs a well-known topos here: The academic nitpicker is contrasted with the creative lover of language, the passionate reader. Hence the question of this paper: What could the term "philology" mean in the context of Borges's work and how is it related to his notion of poetry or, more generally, literature?

In the following two sections of my paper, I will tackle this question by commenting on two of Borges's philological poems, namely, the two texts on Dante's *Comedy* that I have already mentioned. But first of all, I would like to highlight an aspect of the term "philology" that is important for my reading of Borges. A ready objection to the idea of "philological poetry" is that despite Borges's self-staging as reader, his texts obviously aren't philological in any academic sense. In fact, his essays on Dante deliberately affront academic Dante-philology by refusing to distinguish between Dante the (historical) poet and Dante the (fictional) pilgrim.<sup>3</sup> In Borges's seemingly naive presentation, Dante created the *Comedy* for one simple reason: Love. According to Borges, Dante created his vast epic, revealing the eternal order of the cosmos, simply as an excuse to dream

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1 Cf. Jorge Luis Borges. *Obras Completas*. 4 vols. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2010 [= OC].

2 Jorge Luis Borges. "Un lector." *Elogio de la sombra* (1969). OC II, p. 394: "Que otros se jacten de los libros que han escrito; a mí me enorgullecen las que hé leído." On a more general level see Heinz Schlaffer. *Borges*. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1993, p. 8 passim.

3 Cf. for example Roberto Paoli. "Borges e Dante." *Studi Danteschi* 56 (1984), pp. 189-212, p. 204. In the above quoted poem *Un lector* (note 2), Borges himself modestly admits that he "may not have been a philologist" in the sense that he hasn't "gone deeply into declensions or moods or those slow shifts of letter sounds," but instead has "professed/ a passion for language."

of a rendezvous with his deceased lady Beatrice.<sup>4</sup> Naturally, such an idea is unacceptable to academic Dante-philology. In another sense, however, it is quite true that Dante wrote the *Comedy* out of love: Many cantos of the epic are devoted to the notion of love, beginning with the famous but unfortunate couple Paolo and Francesca, who suffer in hell as victims of a misunderstood courtly love. In *Purgatory*, Dante works hard to transform this notion of love and has Virgil present a whole theory which reveals love as a cosmic principle, and the last cantos of *Paradise* introduce Bernard of Clairvaux as a figure of mystical love that leads to the final vision of God. The fundamental role of love for Dante's cosmological vision leads me to another understanding of the term "philology," namely, its more or less literal translation as "love of the *lógos*," the "*lógos*" being the cosmic principle and the divine word. Dante's *Comedy* can be considered a "philological" text in the sense that it is fueled by the "love of the *lógos*," and it discusses this love by citing, glossing and correcting other texts on love. Returning to Borges, I would like to suggest that his two "philological" poems on Dante refer to this understanding of "philology." But by modifying the epic's theological underpinnings, they work to integrate Dante into a larger system which Borges calls "universal literature." My final claim is that this notion of literature, just like Dante's cosmos, is also centered on a *lógos*—albeit differently structured—and in this sense "philological."

## 1. Inferno: Reading Redemption

The literal understanding of the term "philology" that aims at an affective relation to the *logos* is also relevant in contemporary discussions about the role of philology today.<sup>5</sup> Before moving on to Borges, I would like to briefly mention three statements which underline the affective dimension of philology. In his essay *The Powers of Philology*, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht understands "philology" in the narrow sense of "a historical text curatorship that refers exclusively to written texts."<sup>6</sup> This doesn't mean, however, that philology should be a dusty affair; quite to the contrary, Gumbrecht claims that philological work relies on a deep desire for presence and a lively imagination. In the same sense, Gumbrecht asks that philological papers and teaching should aim at effects of presence. The "power" of philology, as he understands it, consists precisely in creating "situations that tease out or at least make visible an excess of 'unfunctionalized' desire."<sup>7</sup>

Although he promotes a different understanding of philology, Ottmar Ette also connects philology with desire. Presenting philology as "Lebenswissenschaft",

4 Cf. Jorge Luis Borges. "La última sonrisa de Beatriz." *Nueve ensayos dantescos* (1982). OC III, pp. 408-410, p. 409.

5 This discussion is also a key topic of Regine Strätling's contribution to this volume.

6 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. *The Powers of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship*. Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003, p. 2.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 86 with note 46.

Ette is concerned with the relation between life and literature, claiming that both are deeply interlocked. For Ette, the consequence is that literature should be understood as an “interactive storage medium of life knowledge,” while philological reading in turn should inscribe itself in life. As a prime example of his concept of philology, Ette discusses essays by Roland Barthes—Essays in which Barthes devises an eroticism of reading, contrasting it with academic literary studies, so that one could understand the title *Le Plaisir du texte* as an idiosyncratic gloss on the term philology.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Ette sees two important aspects of his program realized in Barthes: on the one hand, Barthes emphasizes the corporeal-erotic dimension of reading, on the other hand, he also designs erotic methods of transcribing them, thus overcoming the disembodied academic discourse. In this sense, Ette pleads for philology as a “enjoying science.”

As a third statement, I would like to address Werner Hamacher’s Essay *Für—Die Philologie*.<sup>9</sup> Hamacher explicitly emphasizes the literal understanding of philology in question: With reference to the Greek term *philia*, he interprets philology as an erotic relationship, as a desire for language, which precedes any utterance. The specific structure of “philology” can be illustrated in comparison to other, similar-sounding disciplines. While terms such as “theology” designate a knowledge of something—in this case, God—philosophy is defined as a loving relation to the *lógos*. Philology is therefore not the knowledge of meaning, but the question about or longing for language. As such, it must presuppose and question the possibility of meaning at the same time, and thus position itself outside the *lógos* or at least open itself to such an outside. This is exactly what Hamacher sees as a second aspect of philological *philia*. He writes: “Affiziert zu sein von der Möglichkeit, dass noch das und gerade dasjenige sprechen könnte, das die Sprache, die klare und distinkte, verwehrt, [...] das ist das Pathos und die Passion der Philologie.”<sup>10</sup>

In the following, Hamacher shows with reference to poems by Celan and Hölderlin, to what extent this “Erfahrung der Sprachoffenheit” is the subject of poetry and draws the generalizing conclusion: “Dichtung ist die rückhaltloseste Philologie.”<sup>11</sup> This thought brings me back to Borges, who in the poem *A Reader* also claimed a “passion of language.” In addition, Borges is often claimed for postmodern and deconstructionist approaches, which also include Hamacher’s presentation of philology. Thus, it wouldn’t be surprising if Borges’s philological poetry could be read with Hamacher. It is surprising, however, that Borges is so dedicated to the *Comedy*, which surely describes a less problematic relation to

8 Cf. Ottmar Ette. *ÜberLebenswissen. Die Aufgabe der Philologie*. Berlin: Kadmos, 2004, ch. 4. For a critical discussion of Ettes contribution, see Jörg Dünne. “Von Listen und Lasten der Philologie für das Leben. Nicht mehr ganz zeitgemäße Betrachtungen zu der von Ottmar Ette initiierten Debatte um Literaturwissenschaft als Lebenswissenschaft.” *PhiN* 57 (2011), pp. 73-84.

9 Werner Hamacher. *Für—Die Philologie*. Roughbooks, 2009.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

the *lógos*. Is this contradiction between a medieval “logocentrism” and its post-modern deconstruction to be resolved?

With this question in mind, I will now turn to my discussion of Borges’s poem *Inferno V,129*.<sup>12</sup> The title refers to Dante’s encounter with the unfortunate couple Francesca and Paolo, who fell in love as they read how Lancelot kissed Guinevere. In line 129, Francesca claims “alone we were and without any fear” (“*soli eravamo e senza alcun sospetto;*” *Inf* V, 129), indicating that they didn’t even think of love as they began to read; the following lines declare that the book acted as a matchmaker and thus claim the innocence of the lovers: It is only by reading that the couple becomes knowing (*Inf* V, 130-138).<sup>13</sup> The episode thus is a perfect example for the reciprocal dependence of life and literature that I have mentioned with Erte.

Per più fiate li occhi ci sospinse  
 quella lettura, e scolorocci il viso;  
 ma solo un punto fu quel che ci vinse.  
 Quando leggemmo il disiato riso  
 esser baciato da cotanto amante,  
 questi, che mai da me non fia diviso,  
 la bocca mi basciò tutto tremante.  
 Galeotto fu ’l libro e chi lo scrisse:  
 quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante.

Full many a time our eyes together drew  
 That reading, and drove the colour from our faces;  
 But one point only was it that o’ercame us.  
 When as we read of the much-longed-for smile  
 Being by such a noble lover kissed,  
 This one, who ne’er from me shall be divided,  
 Kissed me upon the mouth all palpitating.  
 Galeotto was the book and he who wrote it.  
 That day no farther did we read therein.

As will be noted shortly, Borges follows Francesca’s apologetic argument quite closely. But before discussing Borges’s poem itself, a few observations about its intertext will prove helpful, namely Francesca’s speech and the relation of reading and loving. In a compelling article, Friedrich Kittler has read this scene as an example of the medieval regime of the signifier: Instead of being concerned with the meaning of the text (as a modern reader would presumably be), Francesca

12 For a general discussion of Borges’s poetical readings of Dante cf. Erica Durante. *Poétique et écriture: Dante au miroir de Valéry et de Borges*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008; for *Inferno V,129* see pp. 349-371.

13 I quote Dante’s *Divine Comedy* from the website of the Dartmouth Dante Project, which is based on Petrocchi’s edition (Milano 1996-1997) and furthermore presents a plethora of translations (e.g. Henry W. Longfellow, 1867, which is one of the translations read by Borges) and commentaries (e.g. Charles S. Singleton, 1970-1975, and Robert Hollander, 2000-2007). Cf. < <http://dantelab.dartmouth.edu> >

and Paolo physically enact what they read.<sup>14</sup> However, Kittler doesn't discuss the fact that the couple suffers in hell for their adulterous love. Apparently, Dante felt that there was something wrong about this kind of "physical" reading. And indeed, a glance at Dante's own love poetry suggests that for him, love first of all is a process of reading and writing, by which any corporality is translated into text (rather than the other way round, as Kittler would have it).

Dante underlines the connection between the infernal scene and his love poetry by way of quotation. In her apologetic speech, Francesca describes the power of love in a language that resembles very much the tone of courtly lyric, claiming the noble character of courtly love. This is underlined as the first line of the three tercets in question alludes to other poems on the nobility of courtly love, especially a famous *canzone* by Guido Guinizelli that begins "Al cor gentil repaïra sempre amore / come l'ausello in selva a la verdura."<sup>15</sup>

Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende,  
prese costui de la bella persona  
che mi fu tolta; e 'l modo ancor m'offende.

Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona,  
mi prese del costui piacer sì forte,  
che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona.

Amor condusse noi ad una morte.  
Caina attende chi a vita ci spense.

Love, that on gentle heart doth swiftly seize,  
Seized this man for the person beautiful  
That was ta'en from me, and still the mode offends me.

Love, that exempts no one beloved from loving,  
Seized me with pleasure of this man so strongly,  
That, as thou seest, it doth not yet desert me;

Love has conducted us unto one death;  
Caina waiteth him who quenched our life!

Apparently, Francesca defends herself by suggesting that a "noble heart" should not have to suffer in hell. This self-defense backfires, however, as courtly love often is defined by its unfulfillment. Moreover, courtly poets before Dante such as Guinizelli or Cavalcanti answer the unfulfillment of distant love by interiorizing and spiritualizing the relationship, so that the lady can be praised as a representation of the unreachable divine. As a consequence, instead of praising the pleasures of fulfilled love, poems of this type indulge in paradoxical phrases to depict the lover's sufferings as pleasant pain and lustful martyrdom.<sup>16</sup> A case

14 Cf. Friedrich Kittler. "Autorschaft und Liebe." *Die Austreibung des Geistes aus den Geisteswissenschaften. Programme des Poststrukturalismus*. Ed. Friedrich Kittler, Paderborn: Schöningh, 1980, pp. 142-173.

15 Cf. Singleton ad loc. and his translation: "Love always repairs to the gentle heart, as the bird in the wood to the verdure." For the whole poem cf. Gianfranco Contini. *Poeti del Duecento*. Milano/Napoli: Mondadori, 1995, vol. II.2, p. 460.

16 Cf. Leo Spitzer. "L'amour lointain de Jaufré Rudel et le sens de la poésie des troubadours." *Romanische Literaturstudien, 1936-1956*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1959,

in point is the poetry of Cavalcanti, to whom Dante dedicated his *Vita nova*. Over and over, Cavalcanti depicts love as suffering that will ultimately lead to death; as a consequence, the ideal can only be evoked *ex negativo*, in antithetical phrases which bar any transcending dynamic. The theological as well as rhetorical configuration of this “love” is pointed out when Cavalcanti describes his heart as “tagliato in croce,” as cut in the shape of a cross.<sup>17</sup> The cross is a symbol of transcendence, but it is carved into the heart and thus evokes death; at the same time, the cross may represent here the contradicting character of the oxymoron, imprisoning any dynamic of transcendence.

It is precisely this so-called “poetry of negativity”<sup>18</sup> that Dante wants to overcome in his early anthology *Vita nova*.<sup>19</sup> In autobiographical poems that present scenes from his youth, Dante focuses on the praise of his lady Beatrice rather than on the lover’s sufferings, and when she dies, her divine being is revealed to him in a kind of apotheosis. It follows that Beatrice is not a mere representation of an idea, she is an incarnation or—in Auerbach’s term—a *figura* of divine presence.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, Dante can abandon the antithetical structure of courtly love and turns to an analogical or typological argumentation. For example, in the commentaries that Dante provides his poems with, he reflects upon the frequent occurrence of the number nine in Beatrice’s life and reads it as proof that her “root” is the holy trinity.<sup>21</sup>

Another important example is a scene in which Dante reflects upon his relation to Cavalcanti in a figurative way. There, he describes how he once saw Cavalcanti’s lady, whom he calls “Giovanna,” being followed by Beatrice.<sup>22</sup> Thus, “Giovanna” is likened to John the Baptist, who announced the coming of the Messiah; in consequence, Beatrice is put in analogy to Jesus, the fulfillment of the word. While Cavalcanti suffers love as a cross-like cut, a paradoxical martyrdom, Dante perceives in Beatrice’s face a divine presence. The primacy of the visible *figura* over the unintelligible oxymoron, however, is once again a result of reading and writing, as Dante’s poems depict scenes from his life and simultaneously rewrite traditional love-poetry, while his additional commentaries reread, interpret and translate his life and poetry in the light of Beatrice’s final

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pp. 363-417, and Hugo Friedrich. *Epochen der italienischen Lyrik*. Frankfurt a. M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1964, pp. 9 sq.

17 Guido Cavalcanti. Sonnet XII, 14. Other lines that address the complex of love, martyrdom and death are VIII, 9-14; IX, 25-27; X, 12; XI, 7 sq.; XXI, 13; XXXII, 1 sq. and 33 sq. For the poems see Contini. *Poeti del Duecento* (note 15).

18 Cf. Tobias Eisermann. *Cavalcanti oder die Poetik der Negativität*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1992.

19 Cf. Dante Alighieri. *Vita Nova. Das Neue Leben*. Ed., trans. and comm. by Anna Coseriu and Ulrike Kunkel. München: dtv, 1988.

20 Cf. Erich Auerbach. “Figura.” *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie*. Bern: Francke, 1967, pp. 55-93, esp. pp. 90-93.

21 Cf. Dante. *Vita Nova* (note 19), p. 92.

22 Ibid. p. 74-78; cf. Charles S. Singleton. *An Essay on the Vita Nuova*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1958, pp. 55-77.

apotheosis. Dante's early love-poetry thus is an effect of a truly "philological" activity.<sup>23</sup>

At this point, it seems safe to say that Francesca's apologetic referral to courtly love and Dante's poetry in particular represents a fatal misreading. Francesca's threefold anaphora "Amore" refers to the pagan god of love, who plays an important role in the first part of *Vita Nova*, but is quickly replaced by Beatrice herself, the lady serving as a figure for the Christian god.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Paolo and Francesca have enacted poetry, instead of transcribing love into "philology," as Dante does. In that, they serve as an infernal anti-type of the love Dante describes in *Purgatory* and *Paradise*. When Dante finally describes God in the 30<sup>th</sup> canto of *Paradise*, he quotes from Francesca's speech, using the same attributes for God that Francesca employed for love. While Paolo in Francesca's account was "constrained" by love to kiss her when they read *Lancelot* (Inf V, 132), it is now love for Beatrice that "constrains" Dante (Par XXX, 15). Thus, he rereads and emendates Francesca's misreading. "The passage in *Paradiso* is clearly meant to reflect negatively, not only on the amorous activity of Francesca and Paolo, but on the protagonist's reactions to it. The god of Love and Francesca are being played against God and Beatrice."<sup>25</sup> Yet, one should not dismiss the infernal couple as a merely negative example for misguided love. In the typological structure of the *Comedy*, the couple represents a fall that is necessary for any salvation. That is why Dante, when he hears Francesca's story, falls to the ground "like a dead body," thus enacting a death that is the precondition for his ensuing journey towards salvation. In this reading, Paolo and Francesca would be Dante's redemptory victims.

Returning to Borges's poem *Inferno V, 129*, it is important to realize the role of the infernal scene in the *Comedy*'s typological architecture, as it is the turning point of Borges's philological rereading. As noted earlier, the title indicates that it is a philological poem. Moreover, the first lines make clear that the poem also describes a philological scene<sup>26</sup>:

Dejan caer el libro, porque ya saben  
que son las personas del libro.  
(Lo serán de otro, el máximo,  
pero eso qué puede importarles.)  
Ahora son Paolo y Francesca,  
no dos amigos que comparten  
el sabor de una fábula.

They let the book fall as they realize  
That they are the characters in the book.  
(They will be in another, the greatest,

23 Cf. Winfried Wehle. *Dichtung über Dichtung: Dantes Vita nuova—Die Aufhebung des Minnesangs im Epos*. München: Fink, 1986.

24 Cf. Dante. *Vita Nova* (note 19), p. 76/77.

25 Hollander (note 13) ad Inf V, 132.

26 Jorge Luis Borges. "Inferno V, 129." *La Cifra* (1981). OC III, 353.



But what can that matter to them.)  
 Now they are Paolo and Francesca,  
 Not two friends who are sharing  
 The savor of a fable.

The moment in which Paolo and Francesca discover their love is here the moment in which they realize that they are characters in the book they are reading. Thus, Borges radicalizes the dynamic between life and reading: The moment of love is the moment in which the distinction between the “real” and the “fictional” collapses, in which human beings enter the literary world. This is underscored by the second sentence of the poem, suggesting that Borges treats Paolo and Francesca as historical persons, who will only later become the famous couple of the “greatest” book, namely the *Divine Comedy*.

The last lines of the poem return to this dynamic by denoting it with the term “dream.” Here, the entrance into literature is conveyed as the realization that Paolo and Francesca are “forms of a dream that was dreamt in Brittany,” namely the arthurian story of Lancelot and Guinevere. Reading a book, dreaming a dream, Paolo and Francesca realize that they are dreamt by someone else. This self-reflective loop is repeated in the last lines of the poem that recur once again to the *Comedy*, stating that this book will ensure they will be dreamt by other readers, who, of course, are dreams themselves.

Un libro, un sueño les revela  
 que son formas de un sueño que fue soñado  
 en tierras de Bretaña.  
 Otro libro hará que los hombres,  
 sueños también, los sueñen.

A book, a dream reveals  
 That they are forms of a dream once  
 Dreamt in Brittany.  
 Another book will ensure that men,  
 Dreams also, dream of them.

Thus, the dynamic in Dante’s scene, by which literature moves into life, is universalized in Borges, as life always already is literature, or, in one word, life and literature together *are* the dream.<sup>27</sup> In Borges, Paolo’s and Francesca’s love, far from being a negative prefiguration, becomes an example of the universal reciprocity between life and literature.

27 On the dream in Borges and Dante see Joachim Harst. “‘Sueño dirigido.’ Zur Poetologie des Traums bei J.L. Borges und Dante Alighieri.” *Traum und Inspiration*. Ed. Christiane Solte-Gresser and Marlen Schneider. Paderborn: Fink, 2018, 211-227 (in print). For the ramifications of this metaphor in Borges’s work see Volker Roloff. “Aspectos estético-receptivos en el discurso onírico de los cuentos de Jorge Luis Borges.” *Jorge Luis Borges: Variaciones interpretativas sobre sus procedimientos literarios y bases epistemológicas*. Ed. Karl Alfred Blüher. Frankfurt a. M.: Vervuert, 1992, pp. 67-90.

The couple's universal exemplarity is also underlined by the text that forms the center of the poem. While the fifth line states that the yet anonymous characters are the individuals Paolo and Francesca (and not yet the famous couple of the *Comedy*), the following sentence insists that by falling in love, they become a universal archetype: They are Paolo and Francesca, but they also are Lancelot and Guinevere as well as "all lovers that have been" since Adam and Eve. With this reference to the first and infamous biblical couple, the poem also hints at its fundamental inversion of values: Adam and Eve are considered as the first lovers, not as original sinners. The same inversion takes place in lines 10 to 14, which state resolutely that the moment of love relates to a dyad that excludes any third position and that therefore Paolo's and Francesca's love cannot be deemed adulterous or treacherous:

Han descubierto el único tesoro;  
han encontrado al otro.  
No traicionan a Malatesta,  
porque la traición requiere un tercero  
y sólo existen ellos dos en el mundo.

They've discovered the unique treasure;  
They have encountered the other.  
They don't betray Malatesta,  
Since betrayal requires a third  
And there are only the two of them on earth.

This exclusion of a third is furthermore implemented by the poem in two important ways: First, the poem focuses on the realization of love and suppresses any mention of the couple's infernal fate; as a result, there is neither a revengeful Malatesta, Francesca's husband, nor a punishing God and a pitiful Dante. In the same vein, the poem downplays the role of the mediator and matchmaker (which is another meaning of the word "third" in Spanish): While Francesca curses the book as a matchmaker in Dante's scene, it falls out of the lover's hands in Borges's first line, never to be mentioned again. On another level, the exclusion of a third position also works in the universalizing dynamic of the poem's last lines: Life and literature are both part of one dream, precisely because there is no third to distinguish between them in a decisive way. This suggests the conclusion that in its universalizing dynamic, the poem reproduces the moment of love as emergence of the dyad.

Thus, the difference between Dante's and Borges's rendering of the scene couldn't be more conspicuous. While in Dante, Francesca and Paolo serve as a negative prefiguration and redemptive victims in the *Comedy's* typological architecture, in Borges, the poem works to redeem the condemned lovers. This intention is further evidenced by another poem from the same collection. It is called *The Justified* and counts "a woman and a man who read the final tercets of a certain canto" among the persons who "save the world."<sup>28</sup> If this line refers

28 Cf. Jorge Luis Borges. "Los justos." *La Cifra* (1981). OC III, p. 356.

to Francesca's speech, i. e. the last lines of *Inferno* V, then the loving reading this canto—a mirror-image of Francesca's and Paolo's reading—is claimed to be a redemptive act.<sup>29</sup> In my view, Borges's poem *Inferno V, 129* wants to be read as such an act.

## 2. Paradise: Disfigurement

Ascending from Hell to Heaven, I would now like to discuss Borges's prose poem *Paradise XXXI, 108*.<sup>30</sup> This title refers to the 31<sup>st</sup> canto of *Paradise*, where Dante has to part with Beatrice, who has guided him into heaven but is now replaced by Bernard of Clairvaux. It is Bernard who will lead Dante's last steps to the vision of God. In one of his *Dantesque Essays*, Borges comments on this moment of parting. As noted earlier, according to Borges's seemingly naive reading, Dante wrote the *Comedy* in order to dream of a rendezvous with Beatrice<sup>31</sup>; consequently, the lovers' separation appears to him as a moment of utter loss, a terrible nightmare. Of course, any Dante scholar could easily show that this is a grotesque misreading of Dante's epic; Borges, however, insists on this point in order to insinuate a striking inversion: Could it be that Dante is jealous of the lovers Paolo and Francesca, who suffer in hell but nevertheless share eternity together? For Dante, Borges claims, there must be something paradisaical about the infernal couple, and something infernal about his heavenly vision of Beatrice.<sup>32</sup> To illustrate this claim, Borges refers to another scene in *Purgatory*, when Dante first meets Beatrice who scolds him severely for not being faithful enough to her. As a reaction, Dante faints for shame and falls to the ground, thereby repeating his behavior when he met Francesca (*Purg XXXI, 88-90*). Here as well, Borges states, the meeting that Dante dreamt of turns into a nightmare. In a phrase that is very important for my reading of Borges, he expresses this peculiar quality of Dante's dream by an oxymoron: Dante's vision of Beatrice, he says, is a "nightmare of delight."<sup>33</sup>

I emphasize this paradoxical expression, which Borges explicitly borrows from Chesterton, because it illustrates Borges's strategic misreading of Dante. As I said earlier, Beatrice serves in Dante as a *figura*, she is the person in whom the divine becomes visible, thus enabling Dante to abandon the paradoxical style of

29 Cf. Durante. *Poétique et écriture* (note 12), p. 367. However, Durante mistakenly identifies the readers in Borges's poem with Paolo and Francesca.

30 Cf. Durante. *Poésie et écriture* (note 12), pp. 317-334.

31 Cf. note 4.

32 Cf. Borges. "La divina comedia." *Siete Noches* (1980). OC III, pp. 227-242, p. 237: Francesco and Paolo "[e]stán juntos para la eternidad, comparten el Infierno y eso para Dante tiene que haber sido una suerte de Paraíso." Cf. also Borges. "El encuentro en un sueño." *Nueve ensayos dantescos* (1981). OC III, pp. 404-407, p. 407.

33 Cf. Borges. "La última sonrisa" (note 4). OC III, p. 409: "En una poesía de Chesterton se habla de *nightmares of delight*, de pesadillas de deleite; ese oximoron más o menos define el citado terceto del *Paraíso*." For Borges's reading of Chesterton see Jorge Luis Borges. "Sobre Chesterton." *Otras Inquisiciones* (1952). OC II, pp. 72-74.

courtly love. This becomes evident in the many scenes in which Dante delights in the vision of Beatrice's face; it is her smile that leads him on, and in her eyes, he sees the twofold being of Jesus Christ, the man-god, mirrored into one (Purg XXXI, 121-126). The presence and immediacy of vision, then, is an important characteristic of the *figura*—which is also underscored by the term's other meanings, the visual and the palpable, amongst which are the human shape and especially the human face. Now, if Borges recurs to an oxymoron to describe the quality of Dante's vision, he reintroduces the paradoxical style of courtly love into Dante's epic, thus barring the transcending movement of the *figura*. And since he does so by quoting Chesterton, i. e. a historically and poetologically completely different writer, Borges distinctly marks this break with a historically faithful reading of Dante. As I would like to show now, a similar inversion—from *figura* to paradox, from the visible to the invisible—also operates in the prose poem *Paradise XXXI, 108*.<sup>34</sup>

The title's line is an exclamation of astonishment and joyful wonder: "Signor mio Iesù Cristo, Dio verace, / or fu sì fatta la sembianza vostra?" (Par XXX, 107 sq.) In Dante, this exclamation is attributed to a pilgrim who sees Veronica's sudarium with the imprint of Jesus's face, and it represents by comparison the excitement Dante feels when he encounters Bernard of Clairvaux. This indicates that Bernard's face, just as Beatrice's before him, is a medium of divine presence. Borges's poem, in turn, quotes the pilgrim's exclamation without referring to its mediating context, but integrates it into a sentence that declares it as a mere wish: "Mankind has *lost* a face [...] and all have longed to be that pilgrim [...] who beholds the veil of Veronica in Rome and whispers faithfully: 'Lord Jesus, my God, true God, is this then what Thy face was like?'"<sup>35</sup> Borges, then, radicalizes the situation related in *Paradise XXXI*: There, Bernard's face, while not being identical with Jesus's, signified another step to the vision of God; here, in Borges, the exclamation refers directly to God's face, but is framed by its loss.

But why does Borges claim that "mankind has lost a face"? His poem begins with reference to a seemingly unrelated story of a dismembered and scattered God. The source he quotes, Diodorus Siculus, gives a hint that he thinks of the *sparagmos* of Osiris, related by analogy to the dismemberment of Dionysos and thus to the Christian Eucharist.<sup>36</sup> In the Eucharist, Jesus shares his flesh and

34 For a general treatment of the paradox in Borges, see Karl Alfred Blüher. "Paradoxie und Neophantastik im Werk von J. L. Borges." *Das Paradox. Eine Herausforderung des abendländischen Denkens*. Ed. Paul Geyer and Roland Hagenbüchle. Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1991, pp. 531-549 and, from a decidedly "poststructuralist" perspective, Alfonso de Toro. "¿Paradoja o Rizoma? Transversalidad y Escritibilidad en el discurso Borgeano." *El siglo de Borges*. Ed. Alfonso de Toro and Fernando de Toro. Frankfurt a. M./Madrid: Vervuert/Iberoamericana, 1999, 173-208.

35 Jorge Luis Borges. "Paradiso XXXI, 108." *El hacedor* (1960). OC II, p. 178: "Los hombres han perdido una cara, una cara irrecuperable, y todos querrían ser aquel peregrino (soñado en el empireo, bajo la Rosa) que en Roma ve el sudario de la Verónica y murmura con fe: 'Jesucristo, Dios mío, Dios verdadero ¿así era, pues, tu cara?'"

36 Cf. Durante. *Poesie et écriture* (note 12), p. 323.

blood with his disciples in order to be present among them after his death. Borges's poem refers to this tradition, but insists that this act is a disfigurement in the most literal sense: "perhaps the face died, ceased to be, so that God may be all of us."<sup>37</sup> This paradoxical sentence is a direct inversion of Dante's final vision of God in *Paradise XXXIII*. Here, Dante first sees God as a point of blinding light, but after a some contemplation he recognizes in it "our effigy," that is, a figure that seems to be both a mirror-image of himself as well as of mankind in general.<sup>38</sup> This recognition of God as a mirror-image is the penultimate step to Dante's realization of his place in the order of the cosmos, with which the *Comedy* ends: In a flash of light, his desire and will conforms to "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars."<sup>39</sup>

In contrast to Dante, Borges relocates the mirror-scene from the Empyreum to the secular world. In his rendering, the very fact that the face's features have vanished is the reason why it could be everywhere: "We may see them and know them not."<sup>40</sup> Taking the idea of the *sparagmos* quite literally, Borges suggests that the face's features could be dispersed over a plurality of persons, so that in the end, every other person's face might bear some resemblance to the divine figure:

El perfil de un judío en el subterráneo es tal vez el de Cristo; las manos que nos dan unas monedas en una ventanilla tal vez repiten las que unos soldados, un día, clavaron en la cruz.

Tal vez un rasgo de la cara crucificada acecha en cada espejo; tal vez la cara se murió, se borró, para que Dios sea todos.

The profile of a Jew in the subway is perhaps the profile of Christ; perhaps the hands that give us our change at a ticket window duplicate the ones some soldier nailed one day to the cross.

Perhaps a feature of the crucified face lurks in every mirror; perhaps the face died, ceased to be, so that God may be all of us.

37 Cf. Borges. "Paradiso XXXI, 108" (note 35): "tal vez la cara se murió, se borró, para que Dios sea todos."

38 "Quella circolazione [...] / da li occhi miei alquanto circunspecta, / [...] mi parve pinta de la nostra effige: / per che 'l mio viso in lei tutto era messo." ("That circulation, [...] / When somewhat contemplated by mine eyes, / [...] Seemed to me painted with our effigy, / Wherefore my sight was all absorbed therein"; Par XXXIII, 127-132, trans. Longfellow.)

39 "ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne: / se non che la mia mente fu percossa / da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne. / A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa; / ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle, / sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa, / l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle." ("But my own wings were not enough for this, / Had it not been that then my mind there smote: / A flash of lightning, wherein came its wish. / Here vigour failed the lofty fantasy: / But now was turning my desire and will, / Even as a wheel that equally is moved, / The Love which moves the sun and the other stars"; Par XXXIII, 145, trans. Longfellow.)

40 Cf. Borges. "Paradiso XXXI, 108" (note 35): "Podemos verlos e ignorarlos."

Thus, in a radicalizing turn of the argument, Borges even suggests that he doesn't think of physical, determinable facial features, but of the act of mirroring itself. Looking into the mirror, that is, I may not recognize myself, my face may be *disfigured* as I realize that from the mirror, someone else's features look back at me. Thus, it is precisely the vanishing of a transcendent position such as God that makes the presence of divine features among us once again thinkable; the fact that we do not know if God had a face and what it looked like allows the paradoxical conclusion that his features could be everywhere—and since there is no third to decide whether this is true or not, this possibility will always be there. In this paradoxical scenario, the death of God is the precondition for his presence in the world.

Once again, this paradoxical “proof of God” is an inversion of Dante's final vision of God as a transcendent being. However, it is also connected to Dante's cosmology, which is based on the term “love.” As Virgil explains in *Purgatory* XVII and XVIII, every being is driven by love. While love can be good or bad according to its object and measure, in itself it is always a trace of the divine creator. Thus, as Dante puts it in his final vision, “what through the universe in leaves is scattered” is “bound up with love together in one volume.”<sup>41</sup> In the light of God's love, the diversity of the created world appears as a single book—a metaphor that will be significant for any philological reading and certainly is for Borges, as I will argue in a moment.

Borges, however, does not speak explicitly of love in his prose poem. He does evoke the possibility of an encounter with the other in the mirror, though, which is precisely what happens between Francesca and Paolo: “they have found the unique treasure, they have encountered the other.”<sup>42</sup> Speaking more generally, I have suggested that in *Inferno* V, 129, the moment of love implies the exclusion of the third. If this is true, then the prose poem can be considered as performing this moment, since it progresses from the existence of God, the ultimate instance of the third, to his death. Borges, then, inverts the meaning of “love” in Dante: While love is a positive trace of God in the *Comedy*, it is the moment of his death in Borges. However, as the death of God is the precondition for his potential omnipresence, one may conclude that love—or, to be more precise, the moment of disfigured mirroring—is a negative trace of God. In any case, Borges rules out Dante's use of the *figura* and replaces it once again with a paradox, recalling the oxymoron of courtly love: The absence of God is the precondition for his potential presence. For this reason, Borges can end his prose poem with a line that reads like an explicit revision of Dante's unforgettable divine vision: “Who knows but that tonight we may see it in the labyrinth of dreams and won't remember it tomorrow.”<sup>43</sup>

41 Par XXXIII, 85-87: “Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna, / legato con amore in un volume, / ciò che per l'universo si squaderna.”

42 Borges. “Inferno V, 129.” V. 10 sq.: “Han descubierto el único tesoro; / han encontrado al otro.”

43 Borges. “Paradiso XXXI, 108” (note 35): “Quién sabe si esta noche no la veremos en los laberintos del sueño y no lo sabremos mañana.”

### 3. Universal literature

The last sentence of the prose poem refers indirectly to this transformation by introducing the term “dream.” It is possible, Borges says, that we encounter God’s face tonight in the labyrinth of dreams, but don’t remember it tomorrow. In *Inferno V*, 129, the dream was a term that encompassed the reciprocity between life and literature, reading and writing: Paolo and Francesca are forms of a bygone dream and they continue to be dreamed by the readers of the *Comedy*, who are dreams themselves. This indicates that the “labyrinth of dreams” in the last line of the prose poem also refers to the labyrinthian process of reading and writing. As the labyrinth is a path that continuously folds back on itself, every reading is already a writing in Borges’s philological poems. They pretend to be commentaries on Dante, but at the same time they perform a rewriting of the *Comedy*. In this process, they invert essential structures of Dante’s epic, so much so that they reach conclusions that are completely opposed to Dante: The redemption of Paolo and Francesca, the possible presence of God in his absence. On another level, however, they follow Dante quite closely, as they reintroduce the question of God to modern literature.

Apart from these concrete effects, however, Borges’s rewriting of Dante follows a more general intention, which brings me back to the notions of ‘philology’ and ‘poetry’ by way of conclusion. In the preface to his *Nine Dantesque Essays*, Borges imagines a “magical work,” a very old painting in an “Oriental library:” “[T]here is nothing on earth that is not there. What was, is, and shall be, the history of past and future, the things I have had and those I will have, all of it awaits us somewhere in this serene labyrinth.” A few lines later, Borges reveals that he is talking about the *Comedy*: “Dante’s poem is that painting whose edges enclose the universe,” or, more literally, “that painting of universal scope.”<sup>44</sup> Borges projects Dante’s idea that the world is a book bound by the love of God onto the *Comedy*, imagining the epic as a lover’s book that contains the world—and thus also himself as reader. In another text that describes his “first encounter with Dante,” he adds that the *Comedy* is a book that requires an infinite number of readings, but also holds an infinity of meaning: “the *Divine Comedy* is like a city that we will never have explored completely. The most worn out and trite tercet can one afternoon reveal to me who I am or what the universe is.”<sup>45</sup> Dante’s poem, that is, contains and manifests the *lógos* of the universe, if it is read in the

44 Jorge Luis Borges. “Prólogo.” *Nueve ensayos dantescos* (1982). OC III, pp. 375-378, p. 375: “no hay cosa en la tierra que no esté ahí. Lo que fue, lo que es y lo que sera, la historia del pasado y la del futuro, las cosas que he tenido y las que tendré, todo ello nos espera en algún lugar de ese laberinto tranquilo... He fantaseado una obra mágica [...]; el poema de Dante es esa lámina de ámbito universal.”

45 Jorge Luis Borges. “Mi primer encuentro con Dante.” *Textos recobrados. 1956-1986*. Barcelona: Emecé, 2003, pp. 71-74, p. 74: “la *Divina Comedia* es una ciudad que nunca habremos explorado del todo; el más gastado y repetido de los tercetos puede, una tarde, revelarme quién soy o qué cosa es el universo.”

right way, and it furthermore contains this philological reader. As such, it may be called a universal epic or, more generally, universal literature.

To be sure, Borges's notion of the "universal" would require another study, as it recurs in many essays and short stories, especially those dealing with the idea of the eternal return. To conclude this paper, I would simply like to connect Borges's appraisal of Dante's epic as universal literature with his more general poetological statements from *Other Inquisitions*. In one of these essays, Borges claims with Emerson that universal literature knows only one true author, the human spirit, as its "central unity" is undeniable.<sup>46</sup> According to Borges, however, the spirit and coherence of universal literature is not positively given, but is a secondary effect, produced by the simple fact that each text differs from every other. Thanks to these differences, each text can eventually be read as a variation of another text, thus producing a global continuity which can then be ascribed to a universal spirit.<sup>47</sup> The spirit as author and *lógos*, then, is just as absent as the God of *Paradise XXXI, 108*, and it is this absence that makes his presence thinkable. This analogy suggests in turn that in *Paradise XXXI, 108*, Borges quite consciously 'dis-figured' the *Comedy* in order to read its God as a name for the paradoxical *lógos* of "universal literature."

It is remarkable that Borges should insist on gathering difference into a potential unity, as this 'logocentric' move distances him from many post-modern claims on him. As I attempted to show, however, Borges's philological poetry comments upon canonical works, thereby transforming and integrating them into his idea of "universal literature" that is centered on an absent *lógos*. This is why reading is so much more important to Borges than writing. Thanks to the technique of disfiguring reading, Borges can seek and find the world's *lógos* expressed in literature. Returning to my last quotation on revelation in Dante, I would now like to stress its closeness to Borges's speculation on God in *Paradise XXXI, 108*: If the "most worn-out and trite tercet can reveal to me who I am or what the universe is," then every line of the *Comedy* is a mirror—reflecting the unknown features of God, revealing the universal author. But the precondition, the strategy of disfiguring reading, will always resemble Borges, who, as a seemingly neutral reader, eventually usurps the position of a transcendent third as author of "universal literature."<sup>48</sup> In one of his latest anthologies of essays, *Personal library*, he collects his prologues to numerous editions of canonical and non-canonical works of world literature, presenting a disparate conglomeration that receives its only unity in the person of its reader. In the prologue to these prologues, Borges quotes from and comments on his poem *A reader*: "One time I have said: 'Let others boast of pages I have

46 Jorge Luis Borges. "La flor de Coleridge." *Otras Inquisiciones* (1952). OC II, pp. 17-19, p. 17.

47 Cf. Jorge Luis Borges. "Kafka y sus precursores." *Otras Inquisiciones* (1952). OC II, pp. 88-90.

48 Cf. Schlaffer. *Borges* (note 2), p. 125, who reads "Borges" as the "epitome of literature:" "Die Literatur sollte keine Autoren kennen—außer Borges, dessen Name dann der Inbegriff von Literatur wäre."



written, I take pride in those I have read.' I don't know if I am a good writer, but I believe I am an excellent reader [...]."<sup>49</sup> It is for this reason as well that I would call Borges a 'logocentric,' or, even better, a 'philological' writer.

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49 Jorge Luis Borges. "Prologo." *Biblioteca personal* (1988). OC IV, p. 449: "Que otros se jacten de los libros que les a dado escribir; yo me jacto de aquellos que me fue dado leer', dije alguna vez. No sé si soy un buen escritor; creo ser un excelente lector [...]." See Borges. "Un lector" (note 2).