

BORGES' CLASSICS

In *Borges' Classics*, Laura Jansen reads the oeuvre of the Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges as a radically globalized model for reimagining our relationship with the classical past. This major study reveals how Borges constructs a new 'physics of reading' the classics, which privileges a paradoxical vision of the canon as universal yet centreless, and eschews fixed ideas about the cultural history of the West. Borges' unique approach transforms classical antiquity into a simultaneously familiar and remote world, whose legacy is both urgent and unstable. In the process, Borges repositions the classical tradition at the intersection of the traditional Western canon and modernist literature of the peripheral West. Jansen's study traces Borges' encounters with the classics through appeal to themes central to Borges' thought, such as history and fiction, memory and forgetfulness, the data of the senses, and the vectors that connect cultures and countries.

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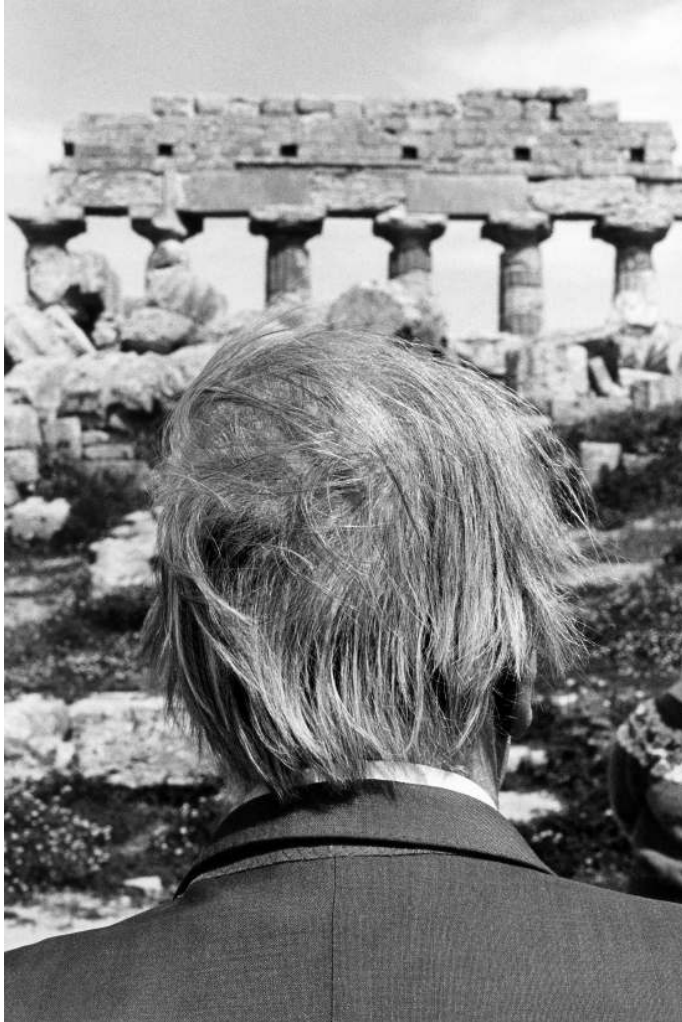
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Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges at the ruins of the temple at Selinunte, 1984.
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BORGES' CLASSICS

Global Encounters with the Graeco-Roman Past

LAURA JANSEN

University of Bristol



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remain, accurate or appropriate.

To my sister, Perla

Primera cuestión: la lectura es un arte de la microscopía, del espacio (no sólo los pintores se ocupan de esas cosas). Segunda cuestión: la lectura es un asunto de óptica, de luz, una dimensión de la física.

First point: reading is a microscopic art, an art of space (not only painters are concerned with these things). Second point: reading is a matter of optics, of light, a dimension of physics.

Ricardo Piglia, *El último lector*, 2005 [on Borges as a reader]

Escribir sobre un escritor puede ser una manera extraordinaria de leerlo.

To write about a writer can be a remarkable way to read one.

Alan Pauls, *Interview with Rodrigo Fresan* [on writing about Borges] Casa América, 2011

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	page xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
<i>Chronology of Borges' Life and Works</i>	xvi
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xxii
1. Borges' Classical Revisions	I
A Rumour of Homer	3
Pierre Menard's <i>Odyssey</i> and <i>Aeneid</i>	6
Zeno after Kafka	8
Classical Memory and Forgetfulness	9
Classical Absences and Desires	12
Classics at the Crossroads: Towards a Global Vision	14
Key Terms and Concepts	20
Aims and Scope of the Book	26
2. The Flow of Heraclitus	30
Borgesian Time and the Classics	32
Heraclitean Receptions	40
Receptions of the Unfinished Text	45
Borges and the Disclosure of Antiquity	49
3. The Idea of Homer	52
Homer in Borges' Postclassical Landscapes	54
Homeric Identities and Identifications	61
Odyssean Voyages into the Post-Historical Self	66
Borges' Homer in the Twentieth Century	71
4. Virgil's Touch	76
The Cultural Geography of Borges' Virgil	78
The Slow Hand and the Tears of Things	88
Borges' Virgil in Cultural History and Aesthetics	95
5. Antiquity in the Poetic Cosmos	98
Classical Fragments in Borges' Poetic <i>Siluae</i>	101

x	<i>Contents</i>	
	Myth, Poetry and the Möbius Effect of Literature	107
	Heraclitus between Chaos and Universal History	118
6.	Interlude: Borges and Global Classics	120
	Global Classics and the Centreless Perspective	120
	Antiquity as a Fragment	122
	Borges' Global Classicism and 'World' Literature	124
	Global Classics vs World Studies	125
7.	Successors of Borges' Classicism	127
	Italo Calvino	130
	Umberto Eco	139
	Derek Walcott	147
	<i>Bibliography</i>	159
	<i>Index</i>	171

Preface

Jorge Luis Borges (1899, Buenos Aires – 1986, Geneva) is nothing less than a titanic figure in the history of literature and criticism. As one of the most significant and influential Latin American writers of the twentieth century and a colossus of global letters, he looms large in the literary imaginations of every language into which he has been translated, including English. His importance for Anglophone thought about books, libraries, poetry, the practice of reading and the art of writing was confirmed by his famous Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1967–68 (published in 2000 as *This Craft of Verse*); few scholars of such matters go very far without invoking him. It would be no exaggeration to say that Borges has shaped not only how we think about the humanities, but even how we dream about them.

Nevertheless, Borges remains somewhat underserved by English-language scholarship, and he lacks any major study of his relationship to Graeco-Roman antiquity, which remained throughout his career an Ariadne's thread to his labyrinthine thought about the literatures and cultures of the entire world. With *Borges' Classics*, Laura Jansen steps boldly into that scholarly breach. Her timely volume addresses a range of audiences: those interested in Borges in his own right; those similarly interested in Argentinian or Latin-American or Hispanophone literatures; scholars of comparative and world literatures; scholars of what has come to be called 'global Classics'; other scholars of classical reception; and classicists looking for creative perspectives on classical literature itself. To read Jansen reading Borges reading Classics is nothing short of a rediscovery of what it means to read – with wit, imagination and humanity.

Jansen deftly conjures Borges as he negotiates his complex relationships to such major figures of the classical canon as Homer, Vergil and Lucretius. Not stopping there, however, she follows him through somewhat less celebrated terrain, like that of the Pre-Socratic philosophers, and farther still, into the broken bits and pieces that comprise much of what lingers,

often anonymously, from the ancient past. So too does she track his engagement with his more immediate predecessors, like Franz Kafka, as well as his influence on contemporaries and successors, including Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco and Derek Walcott (each of these, of course, is famous in his own right as a 'receiver' of the classical past). The resulting portrait of literary influence is breathtaking in its sweep, with Jansen attentive to both continuities and discontinuities – as Borges himself was, ever-mindful of the lessons of Heraclitus (the subject of Jansen's second chapter). And one of the many things that this portrait reveals is the truth of the lesson Borges derives from his reading of Kafka: 'The fact is that each writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.' In other words, Borges provides us not only with an especially complex and dynamic example of tradition and reception at work; rather, he confounds the very temporalities by which literary history is generally thought to play out, troubling, in the end, our conceptual hold on time itself.

Arguably, the most remarkable achievement of *Borges' Classics* is that, by its conclusion, it has reduced its title subject to the status of a pleonasm. That is to say, the reader comes away no longer able to imagine – indeed, unable to remember having ever imagined – any 'Classics' that was not always already 'Borges'. This, to be clear, is not the same as concluding that Borges belongs, at least partly, to Classics. Laura Jansen does unfold, by and by, a compelling argument to this effect. But she knows full well that to limit herself to this would be to claim yet another extraterritorial writer for an imperious (and imperial) West. Her more important argument is instead a converse one that unites the sharpest insights of classical reception studies, global Classics and planetary modernisms. Adding Borges' supra-Western, cosmic conception of classical antiquity to the bookshelf of the classical tradition brushes centuries of dust off the tomes already sitting there. Making the classics strange and wonderful again, Borges frees even the most familiar works to address us in almost forgotten ways, once again opening vast and thrilling vistas onto human experience and its place in the cosmos.

SHANE BUTLER
EMILY GREENWOOD
ALASTAIR BLANSHARD

Acknowledgements

I cannot recall with precision when the idea of this book came to me because I have been reading Borges and the classics for so long. Yet the first tangible memory takes me to the island of Sifnos in July a few years ago. I spent that happy summer rereading a bilingual edition of *The Book of Sand* in Greek and Spanish that reinvigorated my passion for Borges' oeuvre in more ways than I could then imagine. Thank you, Nikolas, for filling my bookshelves with Borges and countless other authors for so many years. This book also has a beginning in Bristol, in late 2014, when I co-organized "Two Nights with Borges" with Shane Butler, then Director of Bristol's Institute for Greece, Rome and the Classical Tradition (IGRCT). I am grateful to Shane for his genuine support, and for encouraging me to write on Borges and the classical past. Warmest thanks also to the editors of *Classics After Antiquity*, Alastair Blanshard, Shane Butler and Emily Greenwood for their enthusiasm about this book and their careful feedback, to Michael Sharp, who offered constant guidance and support, and to Richard Hallas for his terrific work during copy-editing. The anonymous readers were outstanding. I am fortunate to have benefited from their vast knowledge and expertise.

I would not have been able to complete this book without the generous financial support of a Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship during 2015–16 and three awards from Bristol's Faculty of Arts' Research Fund in 2014, 2015 and 2016. The project was also greatly enhanced by a Visiting Fellowship at Princeton University in 2015–16, a Scholar Grant at the Centre of Hellenic Studies, Harvard in 2016, a long stay in Paris consulting the National Library of France and numerous visits to the wonderful Fondation Hardt in Geneva, a city much beloved by Borges. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about Borges and classical antiquity at Bristol, Brown, Cambridge, Johns Hopkins, Princeton, Reading, the Boghossian Foundation, Brussels, The Virgil Society, London, the Society of Classical Studies at San Francisco and Yale. I feel privileged to have been able to

discuss my work with such prestigious audiences. Throughout the entire project, I travelled widely to undertake research in the UK, continental Europe, the United States and my own Buenos Aires. This has given me the unique opportunity to meet and exchange communications with writers, translators, biographers, photographers and expert readers of Borges, who either knew him or have extraordinary knowledge of him. Amongst them, I would like to mention Alberto Manguel, Ricardo Piglia (†), Celia Milstein, Fernando Scianna, Daniel Balderston, Evelyn Fishburn, Francisco García Jurado, Edwin Williamson, Jason Wilson and James Woodall.

I would like to express my gratitude to Andrew Laird, who supported this project from its early beginnings, when it was no more than a vague paragraph, to its full expression. Throughout this process, we discussed a lot of Borges in Oxford, Princeton and Brown, while co-translating several pieces from Spanish and French into English for the book. Evi Fishburn, Charles Martindale and James Porter read the entire book and improved it with incisive and erudite comments. Warm thanks for their intellectual generosity, encouragement and time. I am also grateful to Richard Cole for proofreading different parts of the book, and to my dear friend Vasileia Kouliouri for her help with the bibliography. Amongst numerous friends, colleagues and postgraduate students who have shown enthusiasm for this project, I would like to acknowledge (in alphabetical order): Rosa Andújar; Francisco Barrenechea; Pablo de León; Al Duncan; Andrew Feldherr; Tristan Franklins; Moira Fradinger; Bob Fowler; Bruce Gibson; Roy Gibson; Lorna Hardwick; Brooke Holmes; Kathi Iuanyi; George Kazantzidis; Duncan Kennedy; Dimitris Kousouri; Marina Kousouri; Lisa Kraege; Vassilis Lambropoulos; Miriam Leonard; Justine McConnell; Pantelis Michelakis; Irini Michali; Neville Morley; Ellen O’Gorman; Alex Purves; Ed Richardson; Connie and Ron Stroud; Polina Tambakaki; James Uden; Georgios Vassiliades; and Phiroze Vasunia. My undergraduate students at Bristol took up the challenge of rereading Lucretius’ *De rerum natura* alongside Borges’ *Fictions* and Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*. I learned a lot from our class discussions, their stunning essays (even exam responses!), as well as their exercises in creative writing and performance. A similarly wonderful experience was IGRCT’s Borges Postgraduate Reading Group, which offered me the chance to think about material for this book with a group of brilliant and imaginative postgraduates.

Luke Roman read the entire manuscript and improved it with rare intelligence and vision. I owe him many observations made in this book,

Acknowledgements

xv

and I am deeply grateful to him not only for his time and generosity of mind, but also for his warmth and constant encouragement. My nephews and brother-in-law were keen on this project from its beginning. They offered help when I was not in Buenos Aires, going to exhibitions for the commemoration of the 30 years of Borges' death in 2016, and sending me articles on Borges from local literary magazines and newspapers. I would like to express my gratitude to them for being there for me during the past two years. This book is dedicated to my wonderful sister, who continues to show me like no other that there is inherent beauty in laughter and sophisticated simplicity.

Chronology of Borges' Life and Works

[Adapted from Williamson, E. (2013)]

- 1899 Born on August 24 in Calle Tucumán 840, in the centre of Buenos Aires, to Jorge Guillermo Borges, a half-English lawyer and aspiring writer, and Leonor Acevedo Suárez.
- 1900 Family moves to Palermo, then a poor district bordering the pampas, inhabited by immigrants and once notorious for knife-fighters and brothels.
- 1914 Family goes to Europe and settles in Geneva until end of World War I. Attends secondary school, and learns French, Latin and German.
- 1919–21 Family spends time in Majorca, Seville and Madrid. Joins an avant-garde group of poets known as the Ultra.
- 1921 Returns to Buenos Aires. Forms a group of *ultraístas* and introduces avant-garde ideas through “mural magazine” *Prisma* and little review *Proa* (*Prow*).
- 1923 *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (poems).
- 1923–24 Second visit to Europe. Becomes disillusioned with Spanish *ultraísmo*. On return to Buenos Aires, relaunches *Proa* with a group of young writers and develops a left-of-centre cultural nationalism called *criollismo*.
- 1925 *Moon Across the Way* (*Luna de enfrente*) (poems) and *Inquisitions* (essays). Frequent clashes between Borges' *criollista* group around *Proa* and an avant-garde group associated with the “cosmopolitan” review *Martín Fierro*.
- 1926 *The Extent of My Hope* (*El tamaño de mi esperanza*) (essays, many on *criollismo*).
- 1927 Creates a “Committee of Young Intellectuals” with a group of *criollistas* to campaign for the re-election to the presidency

Chronology

xvii

- of the Radical party candidate, the populist Hipólito Yrigoyen. Increasingly opposed by right-wing nationalists.
- 1928 *The Language of the Argentines* (essays). Yrigoyen elected president.
- 1929 *San Martín Copybook* (*Cuaderno San Martín*) (poems). Meets Nicolás Paredes, a former Palermo gang boss, who will inspire his first story, 'Man on Pink Corner'.
- 1930 *Evaristo Carriego* (biography of a Palermo poet, plus essays on folk themes). President Yrigoyen overthrown in military coup d'état by right-wing nationalists. Disillusioned, Borges abandons *criollismo*.
- 1931 Invited by Victoria Ocampo to join board of new cultural journal *Sur*.
- 1932 *Discusión* (essays). Contributes to various literary magazines.
- 1933 Co-editor of the Saturday colour supplement of mass daily newspaper *Crítica*, where he publishes stories, essays, reviews and sketches until 1934. Becomes a leading opponent of right-wing Argentine nationalism and repeatedly denounces fascism and Nazism in Europe.
- 1935 *A Universal History of Iniquity* (fictionalized biographical sketches).
- 1936 *A History of Eternity* (essays). Edits fortnightly books section of popular weekly magazine *El Hogar* (*The Home*), for which he writes reviews and capsule biographies of writers.
- 1938 Employed as library assistant in a municipal library, his first full-time job. Father dies. Accident on Christmas Eve leads to life-threatening septicaemia.
- 1939 Writes 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*' while recuperating. Loses job at *El Hogar*. Publicly supports the Allies in World War II, and will condemn Nazism and its many sympathizers amongst Argentine nationalists throughout the conflict. Joins *Unión Democrática*, a coalition of Radicals, socialists and communists opposing the pro-Axis nationalists.
- 1940 Begins collaboration with Adolfo Bioy Casares, which will produce stories, film scripts and translations over the years. They compile, together with Silvina Ocampo, an *Anthology of Fantasy Literature* and an *Anthology of Argentine Poetry*. Begins contributing regularly to *Sur*, where he will first publish many of his famous texts.

xviii	<i>Chronology</i>
1941	<i>The Garden of Forking Paths</i> (fiction).
1942	<i>Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi</i> (detective stories), with Bioy Casares under common pseudonym H. Bustos Domecq.
1943	<i>Poemas (1922–43)</i> . First edition of his collected poems, but the three collections of the 1920s considerably revised, a process continued until tenth edition in 1978. Military coup by nationalist officers sympathetic to Mussolini, including Colonel Juan Domingo Perón.
1944	<i>Fictions (Ficciones)</i> , consisting of <i>The Garden of Forking Paths</i> (above), and <i>Artifices</i> , comprising six new stories.
1946	Perón elected president of Argentina. Borges resigns post as library assistant when offered dubious promotion by Peronist authorities. Becomes an implacable opponent of the Peronist regime. Earns living by giving lectures on literature. Editor of <i>Los Anales de Buenos Aires</i> but resigns in 1947.
1948	Mother and sister arrested and latter briefly imprisoned for demonstrating against Perón.
1949	<i>The Aleph</i> (fiction).
1950	Elected president of SADE, the Society of Argentine Writers, a focus of opposition to Perón.
1951	French edition of <i>Fictions</i> , first book to be translated into a foreign language.
1952	<i>Other Inquisitions</i> (essays). Death of Perón's wife, Eva. SADE closed down after Borges refuses to comply with official mourning decreed by Peronist authorities. In Paris, Roger Caillois publishes <i>Labyrinthes</i> , an anthology.
1954	Accident damages his congenitally weak eyesight and can no longer read or write.
1955	Perón overthrown in a military coup and goes into exile. Borges strongly supports the new junta in its campaign to root out Peronism from public life. Appointed Director of the National Library. Elected to the Argentine Academy of Letters. Jean-Paul Sartre publishes eight essays by Borges in <i>Les Temps modernes</i> . <i>La biblioteca di Babele</i> , a collection of his <i>ficciones</i> , appears in Italian.
1956	Appointed to a professorship of English and American Literature at the University of Buenos Aires. Receives

Chronology

xix

- honorary doctorate from the University of Cuyo, Mendoza, the first of many. Awarded the National Prize for Literature.
- 1957 *Manual de zoología fantástica* (sketches of fantastic animals), with Margarita Guerrero. *Book of Imaginary Beings* is an expanded version published in 1967. *Other Inquisitions* published in French as *Enquêtes*.
- 1960 *The Maker (El hacedor)* (prose and poems).
- 1961 Awarded International Publishers' Prize, jointly with Samuel Beckett.
- 1961–62 Semester at the University of Texas at Austin. Innumerable trips abroad henceforward until the end of his life. *Ficciones* (1962), first book translated into English.
- 1963 First lecture tour of Britain.
- 1964 *Obra poética* 1923–64 (new title for collected poems). Includes new poems in a section called *The Self and the Other (El otro el mismo)*, later published as separate volume in 1969.
- 1965 *For Six Strings* (lyrics for *milongas*).
- 1967 Marries Elsa Astete Millán. *Chronicles of Bustos Domecq* (spoof essays), with Bioy Casares.
- 1967–68 Nine months at Harvard as Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry.
- 1969 *Brodie's Report* (fiction). In *Praise of Darkness* (poems).
- 1970 Legal separation from Elsa Astete.
- 1971 *The Congress* (novella), later included in *The Book of Sand*. Begins relationship with Japanese-Argentine María Kodama. Peronist guerrillas start campaign of bombings and kidnapping against the ruling military junta.
- 1972 *The Gold of the Tigers* (poems).
- 1973–74 Resigns as Director of National Library after a Peronist wins the presidency. Borges calls those who voted for him 'six million idiots'. In September Perón himself elected president but dies in office in July 1974 and succeeded by wife, María Estela. Guerrillas escalate violence in face of counter-terror by death squads.
- 1974 First edition of *Obras Completas*.
- 1975 *The Book of Sand* (fiction). *The Unending Rose (La rosa profunda)* (poems). Mother dies at the age of 99. Returns to Geneva for the first time since 1923, and visits frequently thereafter.

- 1976 *The Iron Coin* (poems). María Estela Perón's government overthrown by military coup. Borges makes controversial statements in the media supporting the new Argentine junta as well as General Pinochet in Chile. Armed forces pursue a 'Dirty War' against the guerrillas through torture and 'disappearances' of opponents.
- 1977 *The History of the Night* (poems). *New Stories by Bustos Domecq* (fiction), with Bioy Casares.
- 1977–78 Borges criticizes Argentine military junta for nationalistic sabre-rattling against Chile over islands in the Beagle Channel.
- 1979 *Borges oral* (lectures given at the Universidad de Belgrano). Dispute with sister and a nephew over joint bank account. María Kodama named his sole heir in new will.
- 1980 *Seven Nights* (lectures at Teatro Coliseo, Buenos Aires). 'Shakespeare's Memory' (story) published in *Clarín* newspaper; subsequently the title story of a collection incorporated in *Obras Completas*, 1989. Supports 'Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo' and calls on junta to provide information on the 'disappeared'.
- 1981 *The Limit (La cifra)* (poems).
- 1982 *Nine Dantesque Essays on Dante* (five previously published in 1948, one in 1951). Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands/Malvinas. Publishes poems regretting the ensuing war with Britain. Calls himself a pacifist and an 'inoffensive anarchist'.
- 1982–83 Fall of military junta. Denounces torture and 'disappearances'. Calls for investigation into crimes by both sides during the "Dirty War" and for punishment of military officers. Writes the poem 'Los conjurados' ('The Confederates'), praising Swiss Confederation for enabling citizens to 'forget their differences and accentuate their affinities', and claiming Geneva as 'one of my patrias'.
- 1983 *'August 25, 1983' and Other Stories* (fiction). Welcomes return of democracy. Celebrates election of Radical candidate Raúl Alfonsín as president.
- 1984 *Atlas* (travel pieces), with María Kodama.
- 1985 *Los Conjurados (The Confederates)*, (poems and prose). In September diagnosed with cancer. In November secretly leaves Buenos Aires with María Kodama.

Chronology

xxi

1986

Receives medical treatment in Geneva. Dispute with nephews and housekeeper over property and remuneration, respectively. In April marries María Kodama in Geneva, after obtaining divorce from Elsa Astete and marriage license by proxy in Paraguay, as divorce illegal in Argentina. Dies June 14. Buried in the Plainpalais cemetery in Geneva.

Abbreviations

Authors and works are abbreviated following the practice of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th edition, ed. S. Hornblower, A. Spawforth and E. Eidinow (Oxford 2012), and journals according to that of *L'Année philologique*. The following abbreviations are offered for the convenience of the reader.

- CF* Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, translated by A. Hurley. New York, 1998.
- EDG* R. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, 2 vols. Leiden, 2010.
- EDL* M. de Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and Other Italic Languages*. Leiden, 2008.
- HE* M. Finkelberg (ed.), *The Homer Encyclopedia*. 3 vols. (Wiley-Blackwell 2011).
- L&S^p* H. G. Liddell and R. Scott (eds.), *Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th rev. edition. Oxford, 1996.
- OC* Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras Completas I–IV* (1923–49; 1952–72; 1975–85; 1975–88), Edición crítica anotada por Rolando Costa Picazo e Irma Zangara. Buenos Aires, 2009.
- OCD⁴* S. Hornblower, A. Spawforth and E. Eidinow (eds.), *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th rev. edition. Oxford, 2012.
- CEC* Jorge Luis Borges, *Oeuvres complètes I–II*, Préface de L'Auteur et édition établie, présentée et annotée par J. P. B. (Gallimard 2010).
- OLD* *Oxford Latin Dictionary SNF* Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, edited by E. Weinberger. New York, 1999.
- SP* Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems*, edited by A. Coleman. New York, 1999.