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Commentary vs. 'Hymen'?
The Undoing of Metatextuality in Christoph Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt*

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Abstract. The paper examines the intertextual structure of Christoph Ransmayr's novel *Die letzte Welt*, focusing on the double strategy of integrating Ovid's *Metamorphoses* into the novel's textual and diegetic level. Borrowing Gérard Genette's term, it argues that though Ransmayr evokes the structure of a metatextual relationship between his own and Ovid's work, finally it undermines the distinction between commenting and commented texts. Following a brief survey of the early reception of Ransmayr's novel and of the political issues raised by critical readings, the essay argues for applying a different textual model that does not presuppose the distinction between original or source and secondary texts, proposing instead the concept of an intrinsic difference as suggested by Jacques Derrida's notion of "hymen", that is, a difference working like a dividing and permeable membrane.

Keywords: archivization, intertextuality, metatextuality, rewriting

Although there are several strong reasons to deny the usage and the possibility of defining the term "postmodern", one can still point out some recurrent features of the literary works and of the self-understanding of authors listed under this label. Such features certainly include, in case of postmodern fiction, the highlighting of meta-narrative figures, and the same can be said of the experience according to which it is impossible to break through the work's own textual frame or network of references, no matter how loose and ambiguous these might appear, in other words, to get "beyond" literature and move toward the "present" or toward a reality that is no more textual. Christoph Ransmayr's works might also reconfirm the insight according to which literature cannot but deal with itself, texts with other texts, which also means that, under these conditions, what is conceived of as the figure of an "implied author" (Wayne C. Booth) turns out to be in fact the anthropomorphism of the "reader".

Figures of meta-narrativity, of course, cannot be confined to specific historical or aesthetic configurations, moreover, one could easily show that metanarrative rhetoric has many different faces even within the single realm of the "postmodern" paradigm. Ransmayr's novel *Die letzte Welt* (1988), that brought him considerable international success is based upon a sophisticated idea of metatextual relations. At first glance, it seems to create a hypertext of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but the key to its readability cannot be derived from this model since the abovementioned figure of the implied author as reader infiltrates in the actual narrative situation of the novel. That means that both the metanarrative level and the narrator's and the hero's minds are based on the act of reading: the narrative situation serves as a metaphor for reading.

Accordingly, the novel's structure presents itself in a rather complex manner: it triggers and cancels at the same time those interpretive strategies that generally conform to the reading of eminently self-reflecting texts (e. g., to the reading of parables). The central intertextual figure of the text cannot be described by Gérard Genette's term of hypertextuality since Ovid's work appears as one of the "subjects" of the plot, namely as a literary work frequently mentioned by Ransmayr's characters and the narrative voice: in a sense, it stands in the center of the story. It follows then that at the same time, one has to do with techniques of "metatextuality", too (in the sense of Genette's categorization[1]), that commonly take on the form of commentaries. Latter might pave the way for a historically directed reading that would regard the metatextual relations as manifestations of a historical understanding or as signals of a "re-reading" gesture.

From the stance of reception theory or the phenomenology of reading, *Die letzte Welt* would highlight the tension or ambivalence between the perceptive and the interpretive or historical phases of reading[2] that reveals or rather multiplies the narrative function of the central intertextual figure. There are several passages in the novel that cannot be understood, even in the simplest sense of the word, without one's being acquainted with Ovid's work or at least consulting the "Ovidian repertory" attached to the text (though there were some critics who questioned the purpose of creating such a list[3]), and, thus, block the function of the work/commentary difference in the understanding of the text. On the other hand, the mentioned function is still presupposed by the fact that both the plot of the novel (the uncertain fate and fictional "afterlife" of *Metamorphoses*) and the potential ways to give sense to its self-reflexive level (e. g., creating and revealing "parabolic" meanings, contrasting the various contexts of the public role men of letters may play in cultural history etc.) are shaped by that very difference.

1   Genette, *Palimpsests*, 4–5.

2   For the theoretical context of these concepts see Jauß, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik*, 813–22.

3   See, e. g., Glei, "Ovid in den Zeiten der Postmoderne," 427.

This "mise-en-abyme"-type self-reference of the narrative situation can best be described as the crossing point of contradictory readings, as the syntagmatic extension of what Paul de Man has called "unreadability". This fact leads to the problem of reception, that is to the question how reading is staged on the self-reflexive level of the novel. The question becomes more urgent regarding the fact that those reshaped Ovidian tales that directly address the phenomenon of reading usually point back to the fictional starting point of the story, namely to the point where Ransmayr's Ovid burns the manuscript of what would be known as his main work.

This fact leads to the task of comparing the potential readings of the novel to the mentioned self-reflexive stories which can also be regarded as kinds of reading instructions. It cannot be, however, taken for granted that these self-reflexive stories create an all-embracing horizon for the novel's self-presentation: it would be superfluous and unjustified to presuppose an unambiguous structure of their relationship. Further, the self-reflexive level of meaning cannot be understood without considering the novel's narrative strategies and linguistic features, in other words, without integrating it into the narration and the level of the plot.

The early critical reception, that is, the documented reading strategies bear witness to the fact that the aesthetic judgements, positive or negative, were heavily influenced by the problems raised by the stylistic or linguistic features of the novel on the first place: Ransmayr's language seems to have challenged his readers to an even greater extent than the highly complicated manner of his returning to an ancient predecessor. The discourse of *Die letzte Welt* presented itself as an artistic or even artificial language.[4] This artistic character of Ransmayr's language is highlighted (besides the striking euphonical effects) especially by the strange and rare vocabulary applied in the description of various perceptions and of a peculiarly wide range of natural phenomena and processes. These have, of course, a certain impact on the features of the narrative strategy as well: one could refer to the "hyper-informative" character of Ransmayr's discourse (as critics who disliked the novel in fact frequently did) or to the accordingly crucial role played by the coordinative, catalogic syntax that slows down the narration's speed. This impression is underlined by the fact that the central motifs that play a role in the interpretation of the metafiction superimposed over the plot (such as stones, waves, objects being covered or hidden—these motifs serve, in most of the cases, as counterparts of human speech in the novel) frequently appear in widely extended comparisons that interrupt the story. The reader will soon be aware of the contrast between such passages and the relatively fast narrative tempo of the inserted stories that reveal their self-reflexive level in a more direct way. The latter can, thus, be easily identified or isolated, accordingly their central role in the creation of a metafictional level of meaning can hardly be ignored.

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4   See especially Töchterle, "Spiel und Ernst," 92–101.

The rhetorical complexity of all the comparisons and other narrative techniques is underlined and unfolded nearly everywhere in the text. Such is the case, for instance, right in the in medias res opening of the novel where the description of a hurricane introduces actually the first action of the plot, Cotta's voyage to Tomi, first through a metaphor of a swarm of birds, then by ways of metonymical identifications (e. g.: "Ein Orkan, das war das Schreien und das Weinen im Dunkel unter Deck und der saure Gestank des Erbrochenen" – 7[5]), finally by applying the conceptual metaphor of the sea. The phenomena of nature appear thus not as mere circumstances or the "set" of the action but as the metaphoric substance of the voyage and, since travelling would become one of the significant motifs in the novel, will have an important function in the entire tropology of the text.

The descriptions of nature are organized by metaphorical exchanges throughout the text and serve, in the context of the plot, to establish a pattern of cognition according to which the identity of the recognized objects lies precisely in their endless transformation, e. g.:

> "Der Lichtschein aus Nasos Haus fiel lang über den alten Schnee des Hofes und streifte nach den Maulbeerbaum, aus dem der Wind die Beeren pflückte und über den Firn rollen ließ, schwarze Käfer." (46).

A further self-reflexive emphasis of Ransmayr's novel lies, besides its artistic discourse and striking rhetoricity, on the self-representation of its fictionality. This emphasis comes to light not only through the frequent occurrence of fantastic or absurd elements in the plot but through the fact that, since Ovid's *Metamorphoses* plays a crucial role in the story, the acts of fictionalization recurrently point back to their textual origins (whether Ransmayr's hero Cotta is aware of that or not), and, thus, confuse the fields of references underlying their selective operations.[6] The self-reflexive staging and textualizing of fictional operations in Ransmayr's novel could be the subject of another study, here and now the issue has to be confined to the above mentioned with the single added remark that the fact that fictional acts cannot conceal their textual origin remains similarly unconcealed: it is several times disclosed, often from an ironic stance in Ransmayr's novel. Quite simple examples can be found in the puns on Ovid's telling names (Ransmayr clearly imitates the rhetoric of *Metamorphoses* in this regard): e. g., entering the scene, Echo indeed echoes the words said just before:

> "Echo, sagte der Seiler endlich, sie heißt Echo; sie hält mein Haus sauber. *Haus*, flüsterte Echo, nun wieder tief über das Muster der Spuren gebeugt, *mein Haus*." (100)

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5   All citations of the novel refer to Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*.

6   See Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, 9–10.

The significance of this constellation comes to light with respect to the intertextual pattern and to the metafictional level of the plot, since Echo is the hero who tells or conveys a great part of Ovid's stories to Cotta: her being an "echo" means being a medium of an "absent" text.

The fictional world of *Die letzte Welt* is, like that of its "hypotext", built up by the principle of transformations, which take place, in most of the cases, as anthropomorphizations of objects and (textual) traces, sometimes the opposite way. The narratological question that follows is whether the anthropomorphic characters of the plot who can or should be regarded as heroes and textual quotations at the same time and who necessarily know about the poet exiled to Tomi and his famous work, do also know about the fact that they are also quotations from Ovid's text. This issue, to be reconsidered in another context later, can hardly be solved, even not in the case of Cotta, by the text's evidence since the text allows for both readings to the same extent. According to Ransmayr's "Ovidian repertory", Cotta of course cannot be found in *Metamorphoses* but there are references to him in Ovid's epistles. In the novel, he discovers and recognizes several "souvenirs" of *Metamorphoses* soon after his arrival in Tomi ("Erst in der zweiten Woche nach seiner Ankunft stieß Cotta auf Erinnerungen, die er wiedererkannte." – 2), yet on the other hand the enigmatic closure of the text allows for a reading according to which Cotta finds out that he is a quotation from Ovid not earlier than at this very end of the story:

> "Die einzige Inschrift, die noch zum Entdecken blieb, lockte Cotta ins Gebirge: Er würde sie auf einem im Silberglanz Trachilas begrabenen Fähnchen finden (…); gewiß aber würde es ein schmales Fähnchen sein – hatte es doch nur zwei Silben zu tragen. Wenn er innehielt und Atem schöpfte und dann winzig vor den Felsüberhängen stand, schleuderte Cotta diese Silben manchmal gegen den Stein und antwortete *hier!*, wenn ihn der Widerhall des Schreies erreichte; denn was so gebrochen und so vertraut von den Wänden zurückschlug, war sein eigener Name." (287–88)

Such a reading enables to consider the novel's "world" the copy or imitation of Ovid's work, which itself, nevertheless, also appears in that world so that there hardly remains a chance to separate the fictional world of the plot from the text. Therefore, Cotta's quest of Ovid who disappeared from Rome cannot be regarded as a "real" story (at least not as a story that clearly presents the structures or the composition according to which it could be told). The moves of the narrator's perspective also fall prey to the controversial interplay of fiction and textuality which mutually interrupt or suspend each other: accordingly, his distance from Cotta's perspective keeps on varying throughout the story. The auctorial narration is several times interrupted by free indirect speech, leading to frequent shifts from direct to

indirect access to Cotta's mind.[7] Fantastic occurrences in the plot are reported by the narrative voice as if he ignored their Ovidian origin whereas the episodes playing outside of the "town of iron" (as well as the novel's references to different historical ages) are told as obvious elements of the diegesis, without considering the textual conditions mentioned above.

Challenging the diegetic level, the intertextual structure does not allow for a reconstruction of the temporal and spatial relations of *Die letzte Welt* that could maintain the realistic illusion in the reading: e. g., the ambiguous appearances of the Ovidian "hypotext" blur the chronotopes of the story. The achronic structures[8] of the novel are shaped not only by the background presence of Ovid's work but, in several passages, by the fictive crossing of different historical times: though the temporal axis of the plot is, to some degree, articulated by references to the linearity of passing time and to its duration as well (e. g., seasons or months are frequently named), this fact does not prevent one of Ovid's characters from entering the scene as a German soldier, migrant workers from embarking at Jason's mythological ship Argo, others from talking about Hamburg's ill-famed Reeperbahn etc. (similar strategies of "quoting" history play an even more central role in Ransmayr's subsequent novel *Morbus Kitahara*).

The representation of the novel's central scene can be said to function as the intertextual and mnemotechnical topography of *Die letzte Welt*'s entire text: on the one hand, the scene refers to and comes from Ovid, while on the other, the metafictional "scene" is marked also by the inscriptions left behind everywhere in the town of iron, in connection with the stones that carry the symbolism of remembrance, the traces of nature's destructive power and all the ruins Cotta has to discover.[9] The "architextual" background of the novel is, thus, shaped by a central feature of modern and postmodern literature, namely by the city as the model of representation[10], a technique which works here similar to the functioning of the "spatial" mnemotechnics in many works of postmodern fiction from Carlos Fuentes to Calvino's *Le città invisibilì*. Instead of being mediated through time, the mythological past is thus evoked through a spatial structure, manifoldly marked by the paradigmatic model of the ruined city.

The reason why the novel opens up a parabolic reading despite the fact that its referential context has admittedly "literary" sources lies—besides the instructions of the inserted self-reflexive stories—precisely in the undoing or the simultaneity of

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7   For the narratological context of the problem see Cohn, *Transparent Minds*, 102.

8   See the term in Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 84.

9   On the connections between "places" and "commonplaces" (that is, quotations) in Ransmayr's novel see Naumann, "*Topos-Romane*," 95.

10   See Honold, "Zwischen Archäologie und Apokalypse".

historical times: latter enable the reader to consider Ovid's fate, his exile in Tomi and the nature of the unpredictable political forces which have led to that exile as universal possibilities which could take place at any place and any time.[11] In this regard it does not really make a difference in the interpretation of the dominating anachronic principle whether one presumes the concept of a mythological, never-changing truth at work in Ransmayr's story or, seemingly on the opposite, concludes at the impossibility to return to the myth. However, the fact that metatextuality cannot function unhindered in Ransmayr's novel, leads to the insight that his critique (?) of mythology manifests itself by revealing the quotational textuality (a significant feature of *Metamorphoses*, too) behind his stories, unmasking them as texts from a lost book in the diegetic world: the task of the mediation between different times appears rather as the work of reading than that of historicization. That would mean that the reader is faced rather with the critique of parabolic interpretations, that is, with the critique of reading strategies that presuppose the possibility for the interpretation to separate a nontextual field of reference.

In this regard, it is quite illuminating to face the misunderstanding of the novel's title that appears in an essay of Reinhold F. Glei.[12] According to a critical remark of Glei, Ransmayr's title would in fact be a translation of Ovid's metaphor for Tomi, "ultimus orbis" that actually refers to the spatial (that is: the endlessly remote) position of the "town of iron", not to its (symbolized) temporal condition. Glei's argument seems not to have taken into consideration the figurations of space and time in the novel, probably that is why he ignored those passages of *Die letzte Welt* where the Ovidian formula for Tomi appears in a wording different from the title ("Ende der Welt" – 13, 73).

The relation to *Metamorphoses* served as the second crucial point of orientation in the novel's reception: Ovid's career, his controversial relationship to political power have made him probably the most fascinating ancient predecessor for the literature of the late twentieth century (e. g., the story of Ovid's exile, linked with fantastic elements, serves as the fictional basis of David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*, a novel highlighting the problem of the loss of identity). The metafictional level of Ransmayr's novel reveals a specific way of entering in dialogue with significant works of the twentieth century. By exposing the problem of literature's relatedness to power, Ransmayr addresses a frequent issue of postmodern novels through returning to Ovid and his time.

In most of the cases, the "events" of reading, reception or interpretation staged in the novel can be found in the inserted independent stories, some of them containing fairy tale elements—a feature that might recall the composition of the Ovidian

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11   On the endless nature of time and space in Ransmayr see Naumann, "*Topos-Romane.*"

12   Glei, "Ovid in den Zeiten der Postmoderne," 416–17.

"hypotext". These stories might be conceived of as signals that announce the presence of the metafictional level of meaning and can be divided into two paradigmatically different types. Due to their twofold nature none of them applies to function as the distinguished metanarrative for the entire novel—the reader is faced with their controversial interplay instead.

The stories belonging to the first type have the fact in common that they confront (literary) works or texts and their interpretation with the political and social events of the plot on the novel's diegetic level. The audience of Cyparis' screenings and Fama's "projector" remind of effects and reception strategies known from modern mass media: the reactions of the Tomi audience seem to presuppose the illusion of reality and display a postmodern variant for the "willing suspension of disbelief", thus establishing the link between the represented myths and modern forms of reception.

Those sections of the novel which deal directly with the fate of Ovid, especially with his unconventional and controversial relationship to the emperor and to political power in general, that is, which fit in mostly with a rather critical attitude, can also be located as those passages in the text where the distance between Cotta and the narrator is clearly marked and, further, where the most "foreign" discourses spectacularly infiltrate in the novel's language, first of all discursive features of politics and modern press, both exposed from a rather ironic angle. The strange fate of the exiled poet represents Ovid first as a literary "celebrity" in the modern sense, later, after his falling into disgrace, the plot focuses on the streams of information in modern mass communication: from that point on, the fate of Ovid and his work appear as subjected to hearsay, to the apparatus of political power, and, above all, to random events. His work and his fame would become a threat for political power especially after his disappearance and presumed death.

Ransmayr, thus, confronts the "real" story of Ovid with the uncontrolled or unpredictable meaning or influence of a literary work detached from its author and other authorities of its communication. That could place *Die letzte Welt* in the context of parables about the work of art's critical potential against political power: one could refer, for example, to the Director General of the State Police Archives in Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* who has to admit that, "in reading, something happens over which I have no power".[13] This metafictional self-reference in Ransmayr's novel and the inserted stories have in common the fact that they both pay a lot of attention to the role social mediation plays in the creation of meaning (e. g., a wide range of media, or the unpredictable effects of hearsay or political manipulations).

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13   Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, 238. See further Jauß, "Italo Calvino: 'Wenn ein Reisender in einer Winternacht."

Ransmayr's version of the "interaction of written and unwritten worlds"[14] still somewhat differs from Calvino's, since this metanarrative is spectacularly contrasted to Cotta's investigations: creating another metafictional mirror of reading, these also contribute to the range of the novel's self-reflexive features. Cotta's "reading" differs from the type of self-reflection discussed above precisely because for him, who after all "dwells" in Ovid's text right from the start, there is no need of any mediation. Throughout his quest, Cotta acquires the greatest part of information from three central characters: from Echo (that is, the allegorical figure of echo), the dumb Arachne, and from Pythagoras who arranges the hidden references to *Metamorphoses* in the fictional world. In fact, these characters inscribe the text of the work Cotta is searching for into the "world" of that work, thus preventing Cotta—the allegorical representation of the reader—from finding it. Pythagoras erects "monuments" of the text written by the exiled poet: actually, he doubles and inscribes his master's text as his own traces into the most diverse spots of Tomi, and, at the same time, he cuts it up into small pieces or fragments. These dismembered inscriptions cannot establish but a self-undermining topography of memory. The allegorical pictures of Arachne's tapestries also depict different stories, for instance that of Icarus, from *Metamorphoses* but, being dumb, she cannot tell Cotta the actual meaning of these stories (more about the significance of this feature later). Whereas Cotta deciphers this picture as the denial of the magnificent idea of flight ("Zweifel an der Großartigkeit des Fliegens"), the text itself reveals the fact (in one of those passages where the narrator takes on an undoubtedly external viewpoint) that he does not find out that he has to do with an illustration of *Metamorphoses*.

> "Icarus. Der Name jenes gestürzten Wesens, das im Geglitzer versank, war eines von vielen Fingerzeichen der Taubstummen, die Cotta aus ihren Händen auffliegen sah und nicht verstand." (197)

Echo who escorts Cotta over his journey also tells stories from Ovid's work to which she refers as "*Das Buch der Steine*", the Book of Stones. These tales appear, on a formal level, as Echo's recollections, and she centers her stories on a quite peculiar "praise" of the stones (latter being the most significant motifs of memory in the novel and, at the same time, also a recurrent motif in Ovid's tales about changes of shape[15]). Echo's mediating function reveals itself at the point where she – being the narrator of an Ovidian story—gets caught in and falls prey to the tropological system of the same narrative. The story of Deucalion and Pyrrha—which derives from the first book of *Metamorphoses* (253–415.) and recalls Ovid's speech held in Rome (that repeats, on its own turn, the plague story of *Metamorphoses* [VII. 524–613]) – is told

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14   See ibid., 279.

15   On the motif of petrifaction see de Groot, "Es lebe Ovid", 266.

by Echo to Cotta as the story of the birth of "new" human beings from stones. Since this episode is embedded into an extradiegetic context (the "chronotope" of Cotta's adventures in Tomi) where the theme of echoes reflected and—thus—produced by rocks and stones frequently recurs, the reader is confronted with a chain of metaphorical substitutions that deprives Echo (who, being an echo, "originates" in the stones) from her identity as a narrator on the one hand, and makes her similar to the reborn characters she tells about in her story on the other.

That means not only that Echo's position as a heterodiegetic narrator does not remain stable but also that her stories cannot be regarded as being metatexts for Ovid's *Metamorphosis* Cotta is pursuing in vain (at least at that point): Echo's mediating function gets totally void. This becomes indeed significant regarding the parallel endings of chapters VII and XV. When Cotta—having heard the story about the people reborn from stones—calls Echo who suddenly disappears after ending her story, the response comes as a mere echo of her name, that is an echoed echo that deprives Echo from any outward reference except the bare name. In the closing sentence of the last chapter cited above, Cotta hears his own name reflected by the stones that reveals the fact of his own textual (and quoted) existence. In the retrospect, this episode makes clear the function of Echo's disappearance in the plot: due to the very fact that she is also an Ovidian quotation, Echo cannot orient Cotta's reading adventure, no wonder then, that Cotta's mind gets transformed after losing her. The relationship of Cotta and Echo cannot be thought of as being independent from the "pre-text" of the classical Ovidian tale about the Narcissus/Echo couple, moreover, since Narcissus is missing from *Die letzte Welt*, the character Cotta can be said to be a kind of substitute for him. In this context, the novel's ending can be regarded as the exposure or inversion of a "narcissistic" model of reading represented by Cotta.

If there is a turning point in the novel (this structural possibility is highlighted by the fact that Cotta walks most of his ways two times), it has to be found in this context: after Echo's disappearance, or at least after Battus' petrifaction Cotta gets frequently focused from an outward perspective of the narration which suggests that he also starts to lose his own identity[16], since, getting more and more involved into the world of *Metamorphoses*, he seems to have forgotten about Ovid. This is clearly shown by the description of Cotta's dreaming on the road leading to Trachyla:

> "Sein Haar verwuchs mit dem Moos, die Nägel seiner Hände, seiner Füße wurden zu Schiefer, seine Augen zu Kalk. (…) Rom war so fern, als wäre es nie gewesen und *Metamorphoses* – ein fremdes, sinnloses Wort, das ausgesprochen nur ein Geräusch ergab." (189)

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16   On Cotta's loss of identity see Glei, "Ovid in den Zeiten der Postmoderne," 421.

The metanarrative of Cotta's story of "reading" bears witness to the fact that the perfect identification with the text brings about the forgetting about textuality, it undoes the critical "metatext" of interpretation, and confuses the reading mind, moreover, it hollows the deictic gesture pointing to the work itself. (The fact that the staging of reading has to presuppose Cotta's loss of identity is beautifully underlined by the contrast between Cotta's dreaming cited above and the several times repeated episode where the traces he finds during his quest for Ovid get obscured by his own shadow leaning over them). This metanarrative is completely opposed to all other parables of reception in the novel or places them at least into a different constellation. This interaction throws light on the possibility to read Ransmayr's work as a response to the reading parable of Calvino's novel mentioned earlier: though there are several correspondences between the metafictional self-understanding of the two (for instance, one could point out similarities between their conceptions of language), *Die letzte Welt* makes a clear distinction between commentary that functions as a metatext and reading staged as a textual process. Whereas in Calvino's novel (according to Jauß) fictional discourses enable the experience of potentiality by revealing the plastic and illusory nature of the borderline between reality and fiction, Ransmayr underlines the textual basis of the same experience and locates it as the relationship between text and reading. This technique, somewhat conservative and quite radical at the same time, excludes non-textual experience from the self-reflexive realm of *Die letzte Welt*: herein lies the reason why the alternate fictions of the fate of *Metamorphoses* play such a crucial role in novel, for, under these conditions, it is only its material survival that warrants the recollection of the work. The only cause why Cotta succeeds in "saving" *Metamorphoses* lies in the fact that, despite the rumor spreading in Rome, its textual materiality was preserved: Cotta forgets about that precisely because he is reading the same text.

The traditional gesture of burning the work plays a crucial role in the historical context of *Die letzte Welt*. One of the most striking ways to activate or repeat this gesture in a postmodern fashion can be found, of course, in Borges' short story on *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* which serves—in close relationship to Calvino—as a central reference in Jauß' conception of postmodernism.[17] According to Borges, Menard invents a new "technique" of "anachronism" in the art of reading precisely by burning his own copy which would thus preserve it from the unpredictable developments in the history of its reception, and, further, suspend the one-way traffic in the temporal relation between "original" and "copy". Pierre Menard's ambiguous, and in fact deeply ironic gesture, namely the "suspending" of history, undermines the possibility to establish a historical frame of reference. Since this "suspending" does not concern the materiality of the work (the "original" text of

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17   See Jauß, *Die Theorie der Rezeption*, 30–2.

Don Quijote remains intact!), Menard's "technique" might shed light on the meta-narrative meaning Borges' story, a significant constituent of the intertextual background of *Die letzte Welt*, carries.

Hermann Broch's novel *Der Tod des Vergil* can also be considered as one of those works which are indirectly addressed by Ransmayr: one could refer to thematic parallels, to the correspondence of the highlighted motifs (such as waves or echoes) or to the fact that the ending of *Die letzte Welt* actually recalls Broch's closure (at the end of *Die letzte Welt*, Cotta finds his own identity in a word that cites his name, whereas Broch ends with Virgil's identification with an unfamiliar word that originates "beyond" language). Further, Ransmayr's fictional Ovid can be said to justify Virgil's hesitation, who intends to burn his *Aeneid* in order to prevent it from referential, nonliterary manipulation (and, according to some interpreters, himself from participating in the betrayal of the literate) but finally gives up this plan: Ovid's (and Cotta's) story makes it clear that, on the one hand, it is the work's material existence that provides the only frame of reference for every possible reading, and, on the other, that it is the only instance that can resist the violent metatexts of sense mediation (represented by Ransmayr as legends, guesses, the working of mass media etc.). This issue explains the function of the simultaneity of time in the novel: since the intertwining of text and "reading" resists the violent tendency to stabilize the referential context (or the cultural meaning) of the plot, *Die letzte Welt* does not postulate any "parabolic" meaning except the one that disclaims its own possibility.

Ransmayr's novel thus reconsiders the ideas of the autonomy or self-referential character of the literary work in a postmodern manner (by placing them, paradoxically, into an intertextual space). Since this gesture takes place through the (inter)textual provocation of its own fictionality, the novel sets off an endless process of referential identifications, especially because—as discussed earlier—the diegetic signals of its "hypotext" make the reference to *Metamorphoses* void and inevitable at the same time. In several cases, the reader will have to decide whether the utterances of the characters have to do with their "Ovidian" or "Ransmayrian" role. The self-reflection of the novel seems thus to reveal its own "unreadability", a feature that appears as the reconsideration of the metatextual structure of Ransmayr's first novel: though the plot of *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* (*The Terrors of Ice and Darkness*) from 1984 is also composed as a "repetition" of actions recorded in written documents, in this work, Ransmayr keeps the "pre-text" (and the references to it) separate from the actual narrative, that is, it allows to draw a distinction between them on the diegetic level. In *Die letzte Welt*, on the contrary, the decomposition of the work's own narrative structure becomes clear, consequently this novel undoes the metatextual structure (which remains undiscovered by the narrator) and undermines the difference between "text" and "commentary". What really matters here,

lies rather in the consequences than in the causes of the undoing of metatextuality since the fact that it reveals the strong presence of unreadability means that the reading of the novel will necessarily have to restore this relation in one or another form. This might be one of the reasons why it seems to make sense to throw a glance at the strategies appearing in the early critical reception of the novel, illustrated by some characteristic examples.

Considering the reception of *Die letzte Welt*, one is confronted with a not very high number of arguments that reproduce themselves in endless variants—as is often the case with works quickly becoming successful all over the world. The critical opinions were governed, for a great part, by certain concepts of postmodernism, or, more general, by the at that time recent issue of postmodernism as a cultural or aesthetic phenomenon: this subject is frequently addressed even on a more professional level of criticism that has not confined itself to treat the novel merely as a characteristic product or symptom of its age. The mere fact that Ransmayr attempted to rewrite Ovid triggered, in some cases, prettily heated discussions wherein classical scholars played a surprisingly (?) strong part. No wonder then, that the reception of *Die letzte Welt* in several cases immediately transformed the intertextual conception of the novel. The relation of *Die letzte Welt* to *Metamorphoses* was considered as a commentary, or as a kind of poetic rivalry, both presupposing the restoration of the metatextual pattern at the core of Ransmayr's strategy of rewriting. Critics frequently drew a comparison between historical facts and Ransmayr's version concerning Ovid's intention to burn his *Metamorphoses* and the "performance" of this act: from this view, Ransmayr's rewriting turned out to be in fact arbitrary or simplifying (as if he had ignored the complicated circumstances underlying Ovid's decision).[18]

The "restored" commentary status of Ransmayr's novel led to the revival of an indeed interesting debate about the interpretation of *Metamorphoses*: renowned classical scholars reformulated their views about the question whether the series of transformations in Ovid's work has to be interpreted as processes of the coming about of identities (Ernst A. Schmidt) or, on the contrary, as the sense- and endless cycles of identity changes (Manfred Fuhrmann).[19] This fact shows by itself that the commentary function of *Die letzte Welt*—despite its ambiguous basis—cannot be excluded from the self-reflexive level of Ransmayr's work. One finds, further, a clear warning directed against Ransmayr, according to which the novel—that is treated as being simply a metatext in this case—misunderstands Ovid since *Metamorphoses* is about the creation, not the "end" of the world[20] (an issue that was touched upon

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18   See, e. g., de Groot, "Es lebe Ovid", 256; Glei, "Ovid in den Zeiten der Postmoderne," 410–11.

19   See E. A. Schmidt, *Ovids poetische Menschenwelt*, 39 (cited in Glei, "Ovid in den Zeiten der Postmoderne," 414–15, 418); Fuhrmann, "Mythos und Herrschaft," 18.

20   See, e. g., de Groot, "Es lebe Ovid," 252–53, 258.

in Glei's unproved objection concerning the novel's title). The arguments coming from the side of classical scholars (and from several other critics resounding them) rarely fail to present the laurel wreath to Ovid as the actual winner of the "rivalry", pointing also to the historical fact that Ovid's work has remained preserved even in postmodern times that would reveal the triumph of cultural heritage.[21] This implied idea of such a rivalry is rather surprising, nevertheless it converges with one of the central issues of the novel's metanarrative self-understanding, since it supports the imperative of the material preservation of the work (or the rediscovery of *Metamorphoses*)—though critical conclusions of this kind have to locate *Die letzte Welt* in the position of a metatext.

On the other hand, those readings which did not ignore or evade the complicated self-reflexivity of the novel, display the tendency to consider the evocation of *Metamorphoses* as a hypertextual relation, concentrating on the metafictional level of the work. Readings of this type[22] used to attempt, consequently at the first sight, to disclose or "decode" a certain combinatory system of references. In doing so, they nevertheless had to treat the intertextual "topography" of the novel as a mnemotechnic pointing beyond the novel's textual frames. To presume such an outward-directed mnemotechnic cannot remain entirely consequent (that would ignore Ransmayr's figurations of time and space discussed earlier), except at the expense of locating *Metamorphoses* on the "outside" (that is, quite paradoxically, on the "inside", reduced to the diegetic level of the novel) and—followingly—of restoring again the text/metatext relation.

This process is best illustrated by Barbara Naumann's assumption, according to which the characters of the novel know about their being quotations from Ovid, that is, about being literary characters right from the start. Such an assumption has far-reaching consequences: it presupposes the possibility to consider the novel's plot as a kind of masquerade, Cotta being the only character involved who does not know the preformed frames of the "play", that is, the book he is in quest for (or maybe he also does). If this was the case, that would support the metatextual positioning of the novel on the one hand, and, on the other, highlight the carnivalesque episodes of the novel which could function as signals of the entire "performance". However, Naumann's reading does not account for the fact that the central characters who orient Cotta on his way, seem not to have any idea of being actors in such a play: facing Cotta with their permanent suspicion and obtuseness, they do not tell anything about themselves, even not on those occasions where they in fact narrate Ovid's stories (e. g., that of Echo). The carnival episode of chapter IV plays in fact a crucial role on the novel's self-reflexive level, since it contains a dense sequence of

21   Glei, "Ovid in den Zeiten der Postmoderne," 426–27.; de Groot, "Es lebe Ovid," 269.
22   See especially Wilke, *Poetische Stukturen der Moderne*, 245–57.

transformation episodes also recognized by Cotta. Watching the plays performed at the carnival, Cotta indeed realizes that he has to do with Naso's work: with stories that now highlight the social and political order surrounding the masquerade as experienced from its margins, from a subversive counterpoint:

> „Gewiss, dieser Narrenzug konnte nur ein stumpfer Abglanz jener Mythen sein, in denen sich die Phantasie Roms ausgetobt und erschöpft hatte, bis sie unter der Herrschaft von Augustus Imperator in Pflichtbewusstsein, in Gehorsam und Verfassungstreue verwandelt und zur Vernunft gebracht war. Aber auch wenn dieser Umzug nur noch ein kläglicher Rest war, konnte doch selbst ein Betrunkener erkennen, dass diese Fastnacht ein uraltes Bild Roms widerspiegelte (…). Und war es nicht Naso gewesen, der mit seinen Elegien, mit seinen Erzählungen und Dramen wieder an das Vergessene gerührt und das zum Staat verblasste Rom an archaische, unbändige Leidenschaften erinnert hatte?" (93)

The substitutions of signifiers (which generate the carnivalesque acts of transformation)[23] reveal in this case not only the critique of Augustan Rome: the actors bearing the names from *Metamorphoses* disclose their own reduplication in the play, for it happens only in the carnival that they consider themselves as actors (the play at the carnival is enabled precisely by the fact that they ignore their reduplication in the "reality" of Tomi). The carnival can thus be interpreted as the subversion of the identification strategies of its participants and, consequently, as one of the self-reflecting acts of the novel (to which one might perhaps add the further possibility to interpret this episode from Cotta's "narcissistic" point of view: according to this, it would be Cotta who, watching the carnival, relates the happenings to the stories and character known from *Metamorphoses*). Such "decoding" interpretations can be generated in various ways because, due to its striking rhetoricity, figurativity, and hyper-informative narration, the text does not really supply clear arguments to deny or verify them. The strategy of "unveiling" the novel's rhetorical strategies seems to have been crucial for the critical readers of *Die letzte Welt*: Glei, for instance, accused Ransmayr of the naiveté of having read *Metamorphoses* literally![24] What is really striking in this argument, is the fact that the literal reading of Ovid is considered merely a failure or a deficiency. Such a statement places the discourse of *Die letzte Welt* once more into the position of a critical reading or commentary, thus revealing its failure. The novel's discourse, however, underlines its own rhetoricity, among others, precisely by taking Ovid literally and it is precisely this "literal" reading that blurs the characters' minds and questions the metatextual status of Ransmayr's work

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23   See Wilke, *Poetische Stukturen der Moderne*, 256–61.

24   Glei, "Ovid in den Zeiten der Postmoderne," 423.

in its relation to *Metamorphoses*. Taken as a reading of Ovid, the nearest approach to Ransmayr's novel may borrow its starting point from the assumption of Manfred Fuhrmann, according to whom the transformations in Ovid must be considered as permanent changes without any fixed sense.

In most of the cases, critics treated the configurations of parabolic meaning in the novel (and the consequent questions concerning Ransmayr's concept of literature) as separate from the more specific issues of intertextuality: the former exposed a wide scale of art's possible social functions, ranging from the cultivation of the ancient cultural heritage to its potential destruction, to be observed, according to Karlheinz Töchterle,[25] in the very same gesture of cultivation, for instance, in the retelling of Naso's tales. This idea would oppose Naumann's view mentioned above, as well as the whole underlying conception about *Metamophoses*' re-staging, but seems to ignore the fact that all the characters who mediate Ovid's stories are in fact quotations from *Metamorphoses*. As discussed earlier, the ambiguous output of these mediations lies precisely in making Cotta "forget" about the aim of his quest, and, later, in the recognition of his own textual origin. Töchterle means to discover the features of a Kafkaesque parable in the novel[26] which, however, can hardly play a central role in the narrative layout of *Die letzte Welt*.

The fact that the novel's metafiction denies the possibility of its parabolic interpretation, is best demonstrated by the recurrent attempts and failures to carry out parabolic readings in the reception. The novel represented, for many of its critics, features of postmodern culture considered as ideological clichés and, regarding their social and cultural context, mentioned in connection with nearly all possible aspects of the ongoing debates around the term. There are critics who conceived of the novel as a postmodern fashion product, an arrogant manifestation of a "Kulturprotz" being ignorant of art's social environment, others discovered (for the same or the opposite reasons?) the symptom of a historical crisis situation in it—the two arguments sometimes even appeared side by side in one and the same interpretation[27] (one must add, however, that crisis rhetoric and similar gestures are, in a quite tricky manner, not simply suspended, but at the same time also provoked by the novel: one could refer to several symbolic allusions in the text, such as the title's contingent reference to Christian eschatology[28]). Ransmayr was blamed for being unserious (e. g., for his irresponsibility of introducing real history, that is, fascism into the fictionalized context of the transformation series[29]) as well as—quite on the

25   Töchterle, „Spiel und Ernst," 105.

26   Töchterle, „Spiel und Ernst," 100–1. See further de Groot, "Es lebe Ovid", 257.

27   Töchterle, "Spiel und Ernst," 106, 95.

28   Fuhrmann, "Mythos und Herrschaft," 17.

29   Töchterle, "Spiel und Ernst," 106.

contrary – for his lack of irony or failure to mobilize the stylistic features of parody. Many of the critics assigned, on a more general level, a kind of destructive or at least sharply critical intention to Ransmayr and considered his novel as directed against such different notions as society, sense, literature or even writing itself.[30]

In the light of its critical reception, the meta-fictive self-understanding of the novel seems to have turned into its opposite, for it was read as a threat for, or at least as the questioning of the authority of *Metamorphoses*. This sounds, of course, quite doubtful, especially as Ransmayr's novel can be said to have rather strengthened than threatened the "preservation" and the eternal glory of *Metamorphoses* on the most material level possible, for—according to a publication by Fuhrmann[31]—it managed, if only for a short time, to increase the demand for works by Ovid in the bookstores. The "destruction" of *Metamorphoses* cannot mean anything else but the absorption of Ovid's tales in the discourse of *Die letzte Welt*. There are hardly means to sketch a systematic overview of the hypertextual techniques presented in the novel, since the text demonstrates quite various forms of intertextual reference ranging from seemingly reasonless "borrowings" to rather complicated transformations. In several cases, Ransmayr confines himself to the simple adopting of names (e. g., Cyparis) or (to use Genette's terminology again) to transmotivations, that is, the changing of the sequential order of the plot (e. g., the story of Progne and Philomela), but there are also intertextual transformations to be found in the novel that completely rewrite certain parts from *Metamorphoses*. Whereas, in Ovid, Pythagoras is the character who sums up (XV. 254–58.) the "philosophy" of the series of metamorphoses (and of *Metamorphoses*, too), in Ransmayr's novel he is engaged in setting up the "monuments" of Ovid's work – a transmotivation that might stand for the relationship between Ransmayr's and Ovid's works in general. The comparison between the tale of Deucalion and Pyrrha told by Echo and the plague story in Ovid's speech held in Rome would clearly show that Ransmayr reshaped Ovid's stories about the "rebirth" of man in a much darker manner ("Their rigidness grew slowly soft" [*Metamorphoses* I. 403, transl. A. D. Melville]; "aus jedem Kiesel ein Ungeheuer" [Ransmayr, 169]; Ovid's hard-working Myrmidons born after the plague had been over (*Metamorphoses* VII. 622–57) are described by Ransmayr's Ovid in *Die letzte Welt* as the most disciplined, servile people on earth). Regarding the critical attitude toward power in the novel, such transformations can be said to establish a rather critical view of the ancient myth, its universal code, and the closed structure of its self-understanding. The impression about the "destruction" of *Metamorphoses* might, thus, arise from the fact that one of the aims of Ransmayr's intertextual transformations lies in breaking the rules of the mythological code

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30   See, e. g., Glei, "Ovid in den Zeiten der Postmoderne," 422–23.

31   Fuhrmann, "Christoph Ransmayr, Die letzte Welt," 284.

(or even the universal code of understanding in general). In other words, these transformations (just like Pythagoras) "fragmentize" or dismember Ovid's work and preserve its authority precisely through these operations.

That also means that Ransmayr's work treats the mythemes of *Metamorphoses* as the basis of allegorism, replacing the closed structure of the myth by random allegoresis. This randomness must stem from the metafictional representation of reading: one does not even need to consider de Man's version of the concept of allegory to interpret the central characters of the novel as being allegories of reading. This is confirmed by the fact that the closure of *Die letzte Welt* can be seen as—one of Genette's categories follows again—the diegetic transposition of the famous finale of *Metamorphoses* where Ovid claims the poet's immortality[32] (listing the same dangers—fire, iron, time—threatening the material survival of the work as *Die letzte Welt*): in Ransmayr's version, the work echoes not its author's but its reader's name (and immortality).

The identity of the reader appears in Ransmayr's work of course as a "quoted" identity: that is one of the reasons why it makes a sense to ask how the act of quoting is presented in the metafiction of *Die letzte Welt*. As mentioned earlier, during his journeys, Cotta receives quite ambiguous information from the characters who transmit the stories from *Metamorphoses*. As for the issue of quotation, it seems to be quite significant that the text of *Metamorphoses* can be found everywhere, that is, it has been inscribed into the world of the town of iron (and, accordingly, into the diegetic space of the novel), and it is precisely the "hiding" of these signs by their redoubling that prevents Cotta from recognizing his position as a "reader". This position is interestingly marked by Cotta's "interpretation" of the tapestry that represents the story of Icarus. The "iconic" reading of the picture (which substitutes the Ovidian text here) does not lead Cotta to the "correct" understanding of the story precisely because Arachne is unable to tell its meaning in words, thus revealing the fact that this meaning has an allegorical structure.[33] This further reveals that the relationship between the Ovidian "hypotext" and its representation or "hypertext" (that is, *Die letzte Welt*) is not governed by a universal (or organic) system of correspondences, but is rather allegorical: the only cause why Cotta finally discovers and recognizes *Metamophoses* similarly

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32   "Now stands my task accomplished, such a work / As not the wrath of Jove, nor fire, nor sword, / Nor the devouring ages can destroy. / Let, when it will, that day, that has no claim / But to my mortal body, end the span / Of my uncertain years. Yet I'll be borne, / The fine part of me, above the stars, / Immortal, and my name shall never die. / Wherever through the lands beneath her sway / The might of Rome extends, my words shall be / Upon the lips of men. If truth at all, / Is stablished by poetic prophecy, / My fame shall live to all eternity." (*Metamorphoses* XV. 871–79.)

33   This self-reflection of reading may resemble the problem of the allegorical „understanding" of the Giotto fresco discussed in de Man's reading of Proust: de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 77.

lies in the fact that the text is "inscribed" into the diegetic space where he is search-ing for Ovid and his work (herein lies one of the reasons why Ransmayr might have needed the illusion of the metatextual relationship, that is, the deictic references to *Metamorphoses* in the composition of his novel).

The allegorical condition and structure of meaning production presented on the metafictional level accounts for the fact that understanding (or reading in gen-eral) comes about only in a belated mode, through quotation or repetition. This also explains why Cotta must find his own identity as a mere quotation at the end of the novel: the proper name (being a deixis and a catachresis at the same time) can enter a tropological system (and that is precisely what Cotta as a "trope" of reading is supposed to perform) only in the modes of repetition or quotation that allow for the forgetting about its arbitrary position. In the episode where Cotta recognizes himself, Ransmayr's novel reveals the necessity for all sense or identification to come about as a repetition, to remain a quotation forever, and blocks the access to their presumed origins, to the positing moment in (or beyond) language, or to the realm of pure performativity.[34] This insight becomes especially crucial with regard, among others, to *Die letzte Welt*'s reference to the novel of Broch. In the closing episode of *Der Tod des Vergil*, the moment when the poet dies is represented, on the metafic-tional level, in a similar manner as the identification with a word. The huge com-plex sentence at the end of that novel endows this word with excessive performative power, with a radius reaching "beyond language", insofar as Broch describes it as a monumental speech act carrying Virgil out of the earthly realm which has imposed upon him the task of giving meaning to things.[35] Regarding the implied dialogue between the two novels, one could argue that Ransmayr reconsiders the problem of the material annihilation of the work by rejecting the illusion of the pure positing power of language as its origin.

Ransmayr's universalist conception of quotation can now deliver a convincing reason for the undoing of the strategies of metatextuality in the novel. To stabilize any sort of difference between commentary and text, one must presume the position

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34   As the background of this issue see de Man's sentence according to which „language posits and language means (since it articulates), but language cannot posit meaning; it can only reiterate (or reflect) it in its reconfirmed falsehood" (de Man, „Shelley Disfigured", 117–18).

35   "[E]s war (…) das reine Wort, (…) brauste über ihn hinweg, (…) und wurde stärker und stärker, wurde so übermächtig, dass nichts mehr davor bestehen sollte, vergehend das All vor dem Worte, aufgelöst und aufgehoben im Worte, dennoch im Worte enthalten und aufbewahrt, vernichtet und neuerschaffen für ewig, (…) das Wort (…) schwebte jenseits von Ausdrückbarem und Nicht-Ausdrückbarem, und er (…) er schwebte mit dem Worte, indes, je mehr es ihn einhüllte, (…) desto unerreichbarer und größer, desto gewichtiger und entschwebender wurde das Wort (…): er konnte es nicht festhalten, und er durfte es nicht festhalten; unerfasslich unaussprechbar war es für ihn, denn es war jenseits der Sprache." (Broch, *Der Tod des Vergil*, 453–54).

of an "origin", which would inevitably establish an "external" reference for *Die letzte Welt*. As it might have become clear by now, the relationship between Ransmayr's novel and *Metamorphoses* does not allow for the stabilization of such a distinction, for it could be described rather as a "contaminating and chiastic" structure where "source text and secondary text, though separable, enter into a mutually supportive, mutually dominating relation".[36]

At this point, the hypertextuality of *Die letzte Welt* can hardly be described as the destruction, but rather as the deconstructive reading of *Metamorphoses*—despite the risks such a comparison to a theoretical model might imply. The borderline between the two texts divides and connects them at the same time, being, thus, a kind of "limite/passage" (Jacques Derrida[37])—which is emblematically signalized in the novel by the strange intercourse between Cotta (the trope of the "reader") and Echo (the echo of *Metamorphoses*). At this point, the present reading could hardly evade the conclusion, according to which the dividing line between "commentary" and "text" should be reconsidered (with reference to Derrida's piece on Mallarmé[38]) as being a kind of "hymen", that is, a dividing *and* permeable membrane, where the two texts are written on each other.

Following Derrida's reading on Mallarmé's text *Mimique*, the scheme underlying the present analysis of the intertextuality of Ransmayr's novel certainly could (or perhaps should) be turned over: for the assumption of an "undoing" of metatextuality would still imply the presupposition of a previous stage where the separation or distinction between text and pre-text was possible, in other words, the presupposition of the point of origin in the discourse of *Die letzte Welt*. Ransmayr's text, however, pretends to be a copy, a commentary, to arrive second from the very start, in quite the same manner as, according to Derrida[39], Mallarmé's does. This would also mean that even the metatextual relation must be conceived of as a subsequent effect produced by the text as one of its self-interpreting figures. In this case, one should speak, more correctly, about the effect of self-reduplication in the discourse of *Die letzte Welt* that would indeed allow for the interpretation of Ransmayr's work as the "rewriting" of *Metamorphoses*.

Apart from any considerations concerning the contingency of Ransmayr's perhaps critical notion of culture or, more general, the postmodern "condition", it remains still possible to point out that such a "rewriting" as deconstruction brings about a differentiation within its "subject" itself. The latter, however, still preserves

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36   Hartman, "Literary Commentary as Literature," 206.

37   See Derrida, "Tympan," xi.

38   Derrida, "The First Session," 161.

39   Derrida, "The First Session," 145.

its permanence, since—as Ransmayr's metafiction could show it—such an intrinsic difference (or différance?) would not be possible without the material survival of that subject. The location of the title of Ransmayr's novel within the schematic context of "apocalypse" should, in this case, refer to the threat against literature pointed out by Derrida while considering the possible consequences of nuclear catastrophes:[40] in case of its material annihilation, there would hardly remain any possibility for literature to reproduce itself or—in contrast to the mythological characters in *Metamorphoses*—to be reborn, precisely because literature is lacking any reference outside itself, that is, it "produces its referent as a fictive or fabulous referent that in itself depends on the possibility of archivization". In revealing the illusion behind the assumption of an "external" mnemotechnics which alone could account for the restoration of canonical archives, Ransmayr's novel in fact reconfirms the decision of Broch's Virgil (made quite unexpectedly in his dialogue with Augustus in the third part of *Der Tod des Vergil*) not to destroy his main work even when confronted with the possibility of its political manipulation. The response of Ransmayr's Ovid makes clear the fact that it is precisely the preservation of the text (in the secondary form of quotation) that allows for acting out its intrinsic difference and, thus, enables its resistance to any kind of ideological, external frame of reference. This is notwithstanding the point where Ransmayr's critical parable of power and his metafiction of reading still meet. According to this, the ideal reader of both Ovid and Ransmayr is represented by Cotta (a kind of postmodern philologist) who, giving up the illusion of an origin (of a "source"), brings about the re- and deconstruction of the text at the same time.

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40   Derrida, "No Apocalyse, Not Now," 400. On the contradiction between the annihilation and the deconstruction of literary canons see further: Martyn, "Die Autorität des Unlesbaren."

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